University of Alberta

"NOT THE WAY YOU THOUGHT IT WAS": A PARADOXICAL MODERNIST AESTHETIC IN CANADIAN POETRY

by

Alan Richards ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled "'Not the Way You Thought it Was': A Paradoxical Modernist Aesthetic in Canadian Poetry" by Alan Richards in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Geneviève Michelle Ceppe and Leonard Richards,

my parents,

and to

Dorothy Allen Parker (1922-1995) and Leonard P. F. Anderson

my parents-in-law

ABSTRACT

Experiments by the McGill poets and their contemporaries demonstrate developments in Canadian modernist poetry in English; the poetry of W. W. E. Ross (1894-1966) represents a particular strain. Like that of the McGill movement, Ross's aesthetic emerges as a protest against an aesthetic, derived from Romanticism, that dominates Canadian poetry in the 1920s. It is a paradoxical aesthetic in which beauty, although it cannot be reduced to what the arts create, may be perceived only through art.

Chapter 1 begins to describe Ross's aesthetic, defines modernist aesthetics as an independent mode of thought that resists prevailing values, and summarizes discussions of the origins of Canadian modernist poetry. Chapter 2 discusses The Canadian Mercury (1928-29), a vehicle through which Modernism has been said to enter our poetry. The journal, however, reflects both a late strain of Canadian Romanticism and exemplifies the Modernism that the McGill poets were struggling to develop.

Chapter 3 turns to Ross's poems in The Dial (1928) and in his volume, Sonnets (1932). His poems in The Dial parallel Cubism and aestheticise the transitory and fragmented nature of reality. His sonnets attempt to recover a premodernist prosody; their failure to do so, and their spiritualist metaphors, contribute to his distinct aesthetic. Ross's work exemplifies the paradox that poems are limited in their abilities to perceive values only poetry can discern.

Chapter 4 looks back to the New York Nocturnes (1898) of Charles G. D. Roberts (1860-1943), poems that, like those in The Canadian Mercury, reflect a tension between a strain of Romanticism and a desire for Modernism. They also describe a failed quest

for a modernist aesthetic. Chapter 5 jumps to Al Purdy (1918-2000) and his volume, North of Summer (1967). A late expression of Modernism, these poems contribute a fresh perspective to poetic traditions of the Canadian North. Engaging the people and the landscape of Baffin Island while laughing at his own presence, Purdy generates an understanding of the Arctic that cannot be perceived through historical, political, or scientific discourses. At a turning point in his career, Purdy's poetry parallels Ross's paradoxical, modernist aesthetic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

O, somehow pay back the daily larcenies of the lung!
--A. M. Klein, "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape"

Researching and writing a doctoral dissertation requires support and encouragement from many people. The staff of the Bruce Peel Special Collections Library at the University of Alberta kindly helped me find a variety of primary documents of literary Modernism including Roberts's New York Nocturnes, early issues of Poetry: A Magazine of Verse and of The Dial, and early works by Dorothy Livesay and other poets. They also provided me with useful bibliographical details and helpful suggestions. The Lockwood Memorial Library of the University of Buffalo kindly provided me, from their rare book collection, with a photocopy of Ross's Sonnets, with his own handwritten emendations.

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If Ezra Pound had his "ABC's" of reading, I have mine. I am thankful to Professors Bert Almon, Shyamal Bagchee, and Diane Chisholm for enthusiastic lectures and challenging conversations that introduced me to the diversity of modernist poets and their critics. I also thank Professors Jim Mulvihill and David Jackel whose passions and insights awakened in me an interest in British and Canadian Romanticism. New understanding and the identification of questions that deserve to be pursued rarely comes to me in moments of sublime seclusion, but more often in the melee of conversation. The questions, good humour, and helpful suggestions of my colleagues in graduate seminars in English and in Art History, and in the English Department's Canadian Literature reading group, together with the courageous sharing of their struggles with their own

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication

Abstract

Acknowledgements

CHAPTER 1 1
In Search of A "Sharper Tang": Generating A Modern Aesthetic in Canadian Poetry

CHAPTER 2 30
Wanted--A Canadian Modernist Aesthetic: The Poetry of The Canadian Mercury

CHAPTER 3 71
"Towards a Sharper Tang": W. W. E. Ross's Paradoxical Aesthetic

CHAPTER 4 113
Roberts's Secret Garden: In Search of an Elusive Aesthetic

CHAPTER 5 143
"It's Not the Way You Thought It Was": Purdy's Aesthetic in North of Summer

CONCLUSION 191
Pressed Flowers in the Landscape of Canadian Modernist Poetry

APPENDIX
The Poems of W. W. E. Ross in The Dial 197

WORKS CITED 206

CHAPTER 1

IN SEARCH OF A "SHARPER TANG": GENERATING A MODERNIST AESTHETIC IN CANADIAN POETRY

> From the revolving
> of the saw
> came slices of clear wood,
> newly sawn.
>
> W. W. E. Ross, "The Saws Were Shrieking"

Canadian modernist poetry in English[1] has several points of departure and lines of development. The McGill poets provoked hostile responses from the devotees of a languishing but exhausted version of Romanticism[2] that dominated Canadian poetry in the first decades of the twentieth century. Working independently, Raymond Knister (1899-1932) experimented during his brief writing life with Imagism and free verse. The poetry of Dorothy Livesay (1909-96) demonstrates a remarkable diversity of style, approaches, and interests. If, like Knister, she began by engaging with Imagism, then, like her contemporary Earle Birney (1904-95), she navigated the shifting intellectual, political and aesthetic currents of the twentieth century. Livesay's poetry ranges from imagist and symbolist influences, socialist polemics, documentary realism, and experiments with the concrete and phenomenological poetry of the 1960s, to feminism and intensely personal lyrics. Independent of these poets was W. W. E. Ross (1894-1966). Although he outlived Knister, his writing career was almost as brief. He was more withdrawn and less prolific than Livesay and F. R. Scott (1899-1995), and not as successful as A. J. M. Smith (1902-80) or Ralph Gustafson (1909-95), with both of whom he corresponded. His poetry, however, created a strain of Canadian Modernism that differs from that reflected in Livesay's work and from the version established by the male poets of the McGill movement.[3]

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[1] My dissertation looks at developments in Canadian poetry in English. Relationships between these developments and those that occur in Canadian poetry in French (inside and outside Québec) must be the subject of other studies.

[2] I capitalize the initial letter of a noun that refers to an aesthetic movement or its representatives, but--except for "Romantic"--not that of their adjectives.

Romanticism claimed for art the ability to perceive reality in ways that differ from, but are as true as, the insights offered by empirical and instrumental reasoning;

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[3] Book-length discussions of the McGill poets include Peter Stevens's introduction to the study of the Montreal poets as a group, The McGill Movement (1969), a collection of essays he has edited that treat Smith, Scott, and Leo Kennedy (b. 1907). This discussion has recently been enlarged and updated. The fourth volume of the Poetry Series in the ECW Press's Canadian Writers and Their Works (1990) provides surveys of the life and work of Robert Finch (1900-95) by Susan Gingell, Kennedy by Francis Zichy, A. M. Klein (1909-72) by Noreen Golfman, Scott by Sandra Djwa, and Smith by Michael Darling. Brian Trehearne examines aspects of these poets in his study of the nature and origins of Canadian modernist poetry, Aestheticism and the Canadian Modernists (1989). George Woodcock devotes a chapter in his Introduction to Canadian Poetry (1993) to a brief discussion of the writers represented in the landmark New Provinces (1936). Susan Glickman also addresses the McGill poets in a chapter of her study of landscape aesthetics in the history of Canadian literature, The Picturesque and the Sublime (1998). Klein is the subject of essays collected and edited by Tom Marshall in A. M. Klein (1970), and by Seymour Mayne in The A. M. Klein Symposium (1975), while Sandra Djwa and R. St. J. Macdonald have edited a collection of essays on Scott's literary and political writings, On F. R. Scott (1983). Smith has been a little more widely discussed. John Ferns's critical survey of Smith's poetry, essays, and anthologies, A. J. M. Smith (1979), is a volume in Twayne's World Authors Series, which is intended for American readers. Anne Compton's more recent study, A. J. M. Smith: Canadian Metaphysical (1994), examines Smith in the context of Anglo-American Modernism's interest in metaphysical poetry. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to list the vast selection of periodical literature concerning the McGill poets, but among the more recent studies of the McGill modernist aesthetics are Wanda Campbell's essay, "The Ambiguous Social Vision of F. R. Scott" (1990) in which she argues that Scott's poetry is marked by an ambivalence that results from his subordination of his poetic career to his public life, and Compton's essay, "Patterns for Poetry: Poetics in Seven Poems by A. J. M. Smith" (1991), in which she argues that his metaphysical approaches to death influences his poems about poetics.

Modernists, as Art Berman argues in Preface to Modernism (1994), claimed that "truth is generated by art, and not simply contained in art" (9; his emphasis). Canadian modernist poetry arises as both a development of the Romantic aesthetic and an expression of Modernism. It was not an assault against the Romanticism of the early nineteenth century, or even against its later, creative expressions by poets of the Victorian era, but, as the second chapter of this dissertation will argue, it developed as a protest against an aesthetic that, prevailing in Canadian poetry at the beginning of the twentieth century, reproduces Romantic poetic forms and affective expressions without developing them further or questioning them. It was also a new poetry that participated in Modernism's more general revolt, which Berman describes. "An encompassing meaning does not subsume events," he says, as he explains the heart of a modernist aesthetic; "rather, events of a certain kind, art in particular, determine meaning" (9). Ross's poetry constitutes a paradoxical strain of Modernism. It reflects an aesthetic in which, on the one hand, beauty is that truth that cannot be fixed by, or reduced to, what art creates, but which, on the other hand, may only be perceived through what art generates. It is an aesthetic in which, as this dissertation will argue, prosody, imagery, conceits, and sensory descriptions generate a vision of reality that, although it cannot be contained in poetry, cannot be apprehended by other ways of looking at the world. The words of a poem represent, but cannot stand in for, truth that poetry perceives.

The roots of Canadian modernist poetry have been identified, primarily, with the work of Smith, Scott, and their associates.[4] Don Precosky, for example, suggests that the McGill movement "represents the mainstream in the development of poetry in twentieth-century Canada" ("W. W. E. Ross" 166). Referring to the poetry journals founded by the

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[4] Free verse, also referred to as open form verse or vers libre, is organized in lines, usually of irregular length, which, if they make use of regular metre or rhymes, do so infrequently, depending instead on natural speech rhythms. Translations of the Psalms in the Authorized Bible (1611), poems by John Milton (1608-74), Christopher Smart (1722-71), and William Blake (1757-1827), and the nineteenth-century innovations of Victor Hugo (1802-85), Baudelaire, Matthew Arnold (1822-88), and Walt Whitman (1819-92) anticipate Modernism's free verse but the style is established as a poetic "default" by the Symbolists and Imagists and by writers after the First World War.

McGill poets, Ken Norris argues, in The Little Magazine in Canada 1925-1980 (1984), that it "was only with the rise of the little magazine that a local setting for Modernism would be provided" (11). Both Arthur Stringer (1874-1950), in the foreword to his collection of poems, Open Water (1914), and F. O. Call (1878-1956), in his preface to Acanthus and Wild Grape (1920), had urged Canadian poets to experiment with free verse and to break with the dominant conventions of metre and rhyme. Norris adds that Knister, Livesay, and Ross undertook such experiments but that, because the activity of these poets "was individual and unrelated" (11), it would require the development of literary magazines to establish Modernism in Canadian poetry. The picture that emerges from Precosky's and Norris's arguments is one of a single line of development in Canadian modernist poetry as the McGill poets import into their work, and into the journals through which they expressed their ideas, an international aesthetic, or what Smith calls, in the introduction to The Book of Canadian Poetry (1957), "a contemporary and cosmopolitan literary consciousness" (1).

The McGill movement represents an important strain of Canadian Modernism, but our understanding of Canadian poetry in the early decades of the twentieth century is flawed if, assuming a single line of development, we overlook the fitful progress of Modernism in Canada. Critics point to Stringer's and Call's volumes of poetry as the beginnings of Modernism in Canadian poetry.[5] The manifestos on free verse with which these two poets prefaced their collections suggest that something new is afoot, but their poems do not exemplify the aesthetic those manifestos seem to announce. Rather than offer new perspectives on Canadian landscape or experience, the poems in Stringer's Open Water and Call's Acanthus and Wild Grape rehearse conventional ideas dressed in the open form of free verse, and the empty expressions of ideals and emotions of Call's sonnets, Blue Homespun (1924), exemplify a tired form of Romanticism. In contrast, the imagist and impressionist characteristics of Livesay's Green Pitcher (1928) and Signpost (1932) reflect her engagement with early expressions of Modernism.

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[5] Louis Dudek and Michael Gnarowski, in their introduction to the "The Precursors" in The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada (1967), argue that Modernism begins with Stringer's and Call's prefaces to their own poetry and the magazines published by the McGill poets. This is also the argument of Ken Norris in "The Beginnings of Canadian Modernism" (1982), and of Don Precosky in his essays, "Two Early Modernists" (1979) and "'Back to the Woods Ye Muse of Canada'" (1983).

Like Call, Ross publishes a volume of sonnets. For the most part, these poems are poor illustrations of the creative possibilities that other twentieth-century poets have found in the Petrarchan sonnet and they do not demonstrate experiments with modernist prosody. The failures of Sonnets, however, exemplify one feature of his aesthetics: Ross finds that premodernist aesthetics no longer suffice.

Ross's Laconics (1930) and his poems in The Dial in 1928 illustrate another feature of his aesthetics, namely new perspectives on Canadian landscape and experience. Like Livesay, Knister, and the McGill poets, he was aware of Imagism, but his poetry creates a different strain of Canadian Modernism. Like the work of the McGill Modernists, Laconics and Ross's poems in The Dial decry a strain of Canadian Romanticism that prevailed in the 1920s, and descry, in the Canadian landscape, a new way of understanding the world. The writings of Smith, Scott, and Kennedy engage an international literary Modernism while continuing to value conventional forms and prosody. The McGill poets sought to effect a quieter aesthetic revolution than that of British and European poets; they wanted to displace elements of Romanticism that, in their view, had become outworn in the work of their contemporaries. Unlike Livesay's early imagist poetry, their poems continued older practices even as they experimented with new ones and tried to establish a Canadian expression of Modernism.

Ross's poems exemplify another strain. Although his poems in The Dial, and in Laconics, engage with Imagism and Impressionism, his second collection, Sonnets (1932), suggests that a genuinely new Canadian poetry must make a more radical break with the past. In Sonnets, Ross searches for older poetic conventions that might be revitalised in a new kind of poetry and concludes that such conventions were beyond resuscitation. As he implies in the title of the final section of the collection, "Sometimes Quite Imitative," Ross concludes that resorting to premodernist aesthetic practices results in a derivative poetry, and not in new poetry for a new era.

Modernism does not emerge in a single line of development in Canadian poetry, but in a less orderly pattern of various beginnings, failures, and achievements. Trehearne's study, Aestheticism and the Canadian Modernists, analyses the influence of the poetry of the Aesthetes and Decadents on the first generation of Canadian Modernists; his more recent book, The Montreal Forties (1999), treats the various developments of a second generation. Ross's Modernism is the subject of this dissertation. Before turning to his poetry in Chapter 3, I will prepare for a discussion of Ross's aesthetic by treating, in Chapter 2, that of the McGill poets. Then, in subsequent chapters, I will discuss a volume of poetry by Charles G. D. Roberts in which we can find an anticipation of Ross's aesthetic, and a volume by Al Purdy that develops it further.

Chapter 2 will begin to distinguish Ross's Modernism from that of the McGill movement by looking closely at several poems in The Canadian Mercury, one of the vehicles through which, as Norris has argued, Modernism enters Canadian poetry. These poems reflect the strain of Romanticism that Ross, like the McGill poets, wanted to move away from; they also suggest the kind of poetry that, in 1928 and 1929, Smith, Scott, and Kennedy were struggling to develop.

Chapter 3 turns to Ross's own work. Glickman, in her study of Canadian poetry, The Picturesque and the Sublime, proposes that Ross has been overvalued and improperly canonized (117, 124). Derived from the Greek kanon, or "measuring rod," the word canon refers, on the one hand, to writings that offer points of departure or benchmarks against which to assess other works critically. On the other hand, since the fourth century C. E., it defines a list of works and writers said to express authorized visions of truth. Critical discussions in the latter part of the twentieth century apply the term "canonization" to a process of valorizing specific writings and perspectives while suppressing others. The claims made for Ross can scarcely be regarded as a process of canonization; he is not usually included in lists that attempt to define a Canadian literary canon, nor is his poetry generally treated as an authoritative benchmark of Canadian Modernism. Ross is a marginal poet in two ways. Like Livesay and Knister, he was not part of the influential McGill movement. He was also largely unnoticed until rediscovered by Raymond Souster (b. 1921) who, with John Robert Colombo (b. 1936), published a selection of Ross's poems in Shapes and Sounds (1968). Glickman, however, rightly points out that the few critics who place Ross among the Imagists and claim him as one of Canada's first modern poets overlook Sonnets, as does, for example Barry Callaghan in his "Memoir" that prefaces Shapes and Sounds. These poems, she argues, "have been disregarded by critics anxious to argue that free verse is the only authentic modern prosody" (115).

If Ross's role in the development of Canadian modernist poetry has not been exaggerated, the influence of Imagism on his work has been overstated. As this chapter will discuss, however, there are critics who evaluate Ross's modernist aesthetics in other contexts. Laconics has been discussed with some frequency, but Sonnets has been largely overlooked. So have poems that Ross published in the April and August 1928 issues of The Dial. These poems reflect experiments and interests that he was developing, at the same time, in Laconics. They reflect, however, one element of his aesthetic; another is expressed in Sonnets. Taken together, Ross's poems in The Dial, and those in Sonnets exemplify a noncanonical, and paradoxical, strain of modernist aesthetics.

Elements of Ross's aesthetic are anticipated in work by that Canadian paradigm of Victorian Romanticism, Charles G. D. Roberts (1860-1943). Glickman suggests that his 1901 revisions to his poems in Songs of the Common Day (1893) indicates an earlier date for the beginnings of Canadian Modernism than Stringer's Open Water (113), but another volume of his poems can be regarded as a harbinger of a paradoxical modernist aesthetic. Chapter 4 of this dissertation discusses Roberts's New York Nocturnes (1898) which, in its own way, emerges like the poems in The Canadian Mercury, that is, from a tension between a late Canadian Romanticism and a desire for Modernism.

Ross's paradoxical modernist aesthetic is revisited by Al Purdy (1918-2000) in North of Summer (1967). Purdy's poems, the subject of Chapter 5, both continue Ross's Modernism and modify it. The 1950s and 1960s mark a period in Canada that witnesses an explosion in poetic visions and a proliferation of publications of the poetry of, among others, Irving Layton (b. 1912), P. K. Page (b. 1916) and Leonard Cohen (b. 1934). Against this background, Purdy gives voice, at a crucial moment in the development of his own poetry, to an aesthetics that echoes and parallels Ross's. In North of Summer, beauty is that dimension of reality that exists beyond the reach of art, but that may only be apprehended through art. Free from the need of the poets of the 1920s and 1930s to counter lingering expressions of Canadian Romanticism, Purdy regards himself in these poems as an intruder in the northern landscape; he questions the perceptions of that landscape generated by his own poetry. Roberts tries, in his New York Nocturnes, to fashion a vision of beauty in the modern world that differs from prevailing concepts; the volume anticipates poetry that emerges in the pages of The Canadian Mercury. In Ross's poems, this desire for a new aesthetic creates its own strain of Canadian Modernism by which to generate a knowledge of the world; it is also the strain of Modernism that Purdy takes up and revises in North of Summer, a volume that represents a turning point in his own poetic development.

It would appear that what I am calling a paradoxical Modernist aesthetic emerges in the work of male poets, and as a protest against another aesthetic that is also represented, largely, by poetry written by men. It represents, however, only one strain of the kaleidoscope of modernist expressions in Canada. If poetry by Archibald Lampman (1861-99), D. C. Scott (1862-1947), E. J. Pratt (1882-1964)--and Roberts' New York Nocturnes--exemplify various moments in the transition to Canadian Modernism, so do the poems of Susie Frances Harrison (1859-1935), Marjorie Pickthall (1883-1922), and Constance Skinner (1882-1939). Livesay has already been mentioned as one of the early figures in Canadian modernist poetry, but the development of her work follows a different line from that of Ross's. As Purdy's voice emerges in the poetry of the second half of the twentieth century, so do those of Margaret Atwood (b. 1939), Phyllis Webb (b. 1927), and Daphne Marlatt (b. 1942). The interests and concerns of Webb and Marlatt link them with postmodernist developments while Purdy's North of Summer continues, as does Atwood's The Journals of Susanna Moodie (1970) to reflect modernist aesthetics. It is Purdy rather than Atwood, however, who develops a perception of the world that parallels Ross's paradoxical aesthetic. It is with the development of this aesthetic that I am concerned; important questions about the engendering of specific strains of Canadian Modernism lies outside the framework of this dissertation.

Like that of the McGill poets, Ross's aesthetics arise from a struggle to displace a strain of Romanticism that may be characterized by, among other features, empty statements--rather than genuine expressions--of emotions and an unquestioning use of received conventions. Its rejection by Canadian Modernists is not a further illustration of a tendency that is criticized, for example, by Suzanne Clark in her study, Sentimental Modernism (1991), a tendency that associates sentimental expressions with female writers. The aesthetic opposed by Canadian Modernism constitute a late version of Canadian Romanticism that was dead but not yet buried. Among the clearest representatives of this enervated aesthetics are some of the poems of Bliss Carman and Wilson MacDonald (1880-1967), both male poets who enjoyed widespread popularity in the early decades of the twentieth century. Critics such as Compton, Glickman, and Trehearne discuss aspects of the rich diversity of poetic practices that contributed to the development of Canadian modernist poetry; other aspects await further investigation. I hope my dissertation will contribute to these discussions by arguing that Ross's poetry discloses one strain of Canadian Modernism that has been overlooked.

Some definitions are in order here. The terms "Modernism"[6] and "aesthetic"[7] are slippery. In this chapter, the first section that follows this introduction identifies elements of Ross's paradoxical aesthetic while reserving a fuller discussion of his poetry until Chapter 3. A second section defines the term "aesthetic" as an independent mode of thought that becomes, in early Modernism, an activity that resists prevailing cultural values. Accounts of the origins of a Canadian modernist aesthetic are the subject of the third and final section which, against the background of these definitions, summarizes the nature of Ross's Modernism.

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[6] The diversity of critical approaches demonstrates the protean nature of the concept of Modernism. Essays in Modernism 1890-1930: A Guide to European Literature (1976; 1991), edited by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, survey the intellectual and social context of British and European Modernism, its literary movements, and its expressions in poetry, novels, and drama. These discussions are updated by the essays in Theorizing Modernism (1993), edited by Stephen Giles, which explore Modernism from several postmodernist critical approaches. Patricia Waugh's Practising Postmodernism Reading Modernism (1992) places Modernism, through a close reading of postmodernist and modernist novels, in a relationship of continuity with both Romanticism and Postmodernism. Astradur Eysteinsson's The Concept of Modernism (1990) is concerned with theoretical constructs created by diverse critical approaches and his own perception of Modernism as a form of cultural resistance rather than an apolitical aesthetic. In Preface to Modernism, Art Berman argues that modernist art and literature develop through the struggles of writers and artists to hold on to their Romantic origins in a world

I

"Foreword" (1929), the first poem in Ross's Laconics, and the one with which Raymond Souster and John Robert Colombo begin their collection of Ross's work, Shapes and Sounds, announces an aesthetic that embodies "something 'North American'-- / and something of / the sharper tang of Canada" (l. 14). The quotation marks around the nebulous term "North America" and the vagueness of the noun "something," point suggestively to a poetry in

> a manner more "Canadian"
> than the most [sic]
> of what has been put down in verse
> in Canada. (4-7)

---

increasingly dominated by an alliance between empirical science and capitalism. Other approaches include Suzanne Clark's feminist critique in Sentimental Modernism, Daniel R. Schwarz's study of the relationship between art and literature, Reconfiguring Modernism (1997), Christopher Butler's investigation of avant-garde movements in Early Modernism: Literature, Music and Painting in Europe 1900-1916 (1994), and Peter Nicholls' Modernisms: A Literary Guide (1995), a discussion of Anglo-American Modernism within the context of a survey of European Modernism from the French Symbolists to Surrealism.

[7] As a noun, "aesthetic" refers to a way of perceiving and thinking about the world, and also to a set of formal strategies or techniques employed to create a particular work, such as a painting, an architectural design, or a poem. "Aesthetics" refers to the philosophical act of thinking about the aesthetic.

Ross's aesthetic seeks a new way of perceiving Canadian experience in which the truth of this experience may be evoked in poetry but cannot be contained in its images and lines; beauty will remain an elusive "something." Another poem in Laconics, "The Saws Were Shrieking" (1929), exemplifies, through its images of motion and mutability, Ross's aesthetic of a "sharper tang":

> The saws were shrieking
> and cutting into
> the clean white wood
> of the spruce logs
> or the tinted hemlock
> that smells as sweet--
> or stronger pine,
> the white and the red. (1-8)

The sparse poetics of Imagism and the language of literary Impressionism create new perceptions of elements of a landscape that is both wild and industrial. Literary Impressionism, like Impressionism in music, is an application of an aesthetic that began in 1874 with a Paris exhibition of French painters, including Claude Monet (1840-1926). Concerned with fleeting impressions generated by light and its transitory effects, Impressionism reflects the fast pace and fragmented lives of an urban culture. It shifts art's attention away from a direct treatment of objects to the effects of light on those objects, forcing spectators to regard art in new ways. The impressions kindled by a given work are not prescribed by the conventions of representational art; they are generated by the viewers' perceptions.

Ross's poem, "The Saws Were Shrieking," is not a literal description of an element of Ontario's wilderness. It invites us to view the poem itself as a way of generating truth, and not as an objective description of a reality (a pile of logs, for example) that exists "out there" and that may be verified by anyone who can find the place where Ross had seen it. The poem shows us only a few aspects of the trees. They are no longer whole trees but logs, and they are represented only by the sensory details of colour and smell. These logs, however, are transformed into sawn lumber; they point us beyond a sawmill in the Ontario bush to construction activity in an urban environment. Further, the process that transforms logs into lumber also transforms the machinery of the sawmill into a creative agent. A "whirling saw," with its shrill and ominous sounds (9-12), generates a new kind of beauty. Though different in form, the sawn lumber at the end of the poem has the same colour and smell as the raw timber at its beginning:

> From the revolving
> of the saw
> came slices of clear wood,
> newly sawn,
> white pine and red,
> or spruce and hemlock,
> the sweet spruce,
> and the sweet hemlock. (17-24)

Ross's aesthetic does not find beauty in a conventionally idyllic "lovely tree"; that conventional tree, though altered, can still be found leaning under a whirling sky in "The Lonely Land," Smith's poem from the mid-1920s (last revised in 1929). "The Saws Were Shrieking" as a synecdoche for Ross's aesthetic, which we can see emerging in Laconics and in his poems in The Dial. It is an approach that not only departs from the conventions of late Romanticism, but also distinguishes itself from the modernist aesthetics of the McGill poets. Ross's poem locates beauty in the encounter between logs and blades. Beauty is not inherent in the landscape; it is contingent upon the perceptions of the poet--and of the reader--of forces in motion against one another.

Both "The Lonely Land" and "The Saws Were Shrieking" represent an emerging Modernism in Canadian poetry. They construct an aesthetic perspective on human experience that parts company with an aesthetic in which art seconds an ethical vision or an insight generated through rational discourse. They also effectively counter a poetry that, unlike the Romanticism from which it is derived, responds to nature through vaguely identified emotions, or describes it in an idealistic, and usually anti-urban, view of the world. The trees in these poems are not those of Bliss Carman (1862-1929). In Carman's "The Eavesdropper" (1893), for example, yellow maple leaves against a fairy-world sky of "silvery blue" rustle with "tiny multitudinous sound[s]." Like Ross's logs, these leaves are transformed, but not into something as mundane as sawmill products:

> The livelong day the elvish leaves
> Danced with their shadows on the floor;
> And the lost children of the wind
> Went straying homeward by our door. (13-16)

The maple tree is a fixed centre as the changing sounds and colours of a day slip around it. The first verse evokes the "hush of dawn" (1), and the "livelong day" shifts into a crimson-hazed afternoon (19) before the arrival of the evening in which the leaves continue to dance, in lines of iambic tetrameter, but to a gloomier music:

> Then as the purple twilight came
> And touched the vines along our eaves,
> Another Shadow stood without
> And gloomed the dancing of the leaves. (21-24)

This tree, like the "paling autumn-tide" (4) and the poem's closing view of "the verge of western sky" (32), is part of a landscape onto which Carman projects a vision of death and the mutability of human life.

In his own manifesto-like declaration, "Wanted--Canadian Criticism" (1928), Smith denounces a Canadian poetry that had been "altogether too self-conscious of its environment, of its position in space, and scarcely conscious at all of its position in time" (601). A comment in "Contemporary Poetry" (1926) suggests what he means by the position of poetry "in time": "Our way of living has changed; so too have our religious and philosophical ideas" (31). The object of Smith's attack is the strain of Romanticism Carman's poem exemplifies. Smith criticises a poetry that refers to explicitly Canadianized natural objects and that reflects conventional religious, philosophical, or nationalist ideals. His criticism is also directed against poetry that ignores the real experiences of living in the world during the first decades of the twentieth century, a turbulent period of urbanization and of technological and economic growth. In his "Rejected Preface" (1936), Smith sarcastically numbers "pine trees, the open road, God, snowshoes or Pan" among the stock expressions of this kind of poetry. "The most popular experience," he adds, "is to be pained, hurt, stabbed or seared by beauty--preferably by the yellow flame of a crocus in the spring or the red flame of a maple leaf in autumn" (170). Smith's words may reflect an enthusiastic polemic, but his point is clear: the goal of the McGill poets was to effect a break with the late Canadian Romanticism.

Ross shares with Smith a rejection of conventional poetry packaged in Canadian clichés. As the McGill poets begin, haltingly, to do in the late 1920s, Ross recasts Canadian landscape in the sparse style of Imagism and the irregular rhythms of free verse. The aesthetic represented in "Foreword" and "The Saws Were Shrieking," however, also distinguishes his strand of Modernism from theirs. He does not engage, as do Smith and Kennedy, with the English metaphysical poets or the French Symbolists. Moreover, his poems comment on social and political events of the time, as do many of Scott's. Occasionally, his verses create parody and satire but, although he includes some of them in his letters to Smith and Gustafson,[8] he does not, as Scott does with his polemical poetry, publish them. Instead, Ross opens his own route to Modernism. Like "The Saws Were Shrieking," "Laboratory" (1930), another poem in Laconics, illustrates Ross's modernist aesthetic. The rhythm arises from contrasting patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables. This rhythm, and the poem's tangible details and sensory perceptions, create a concentrated image evident in the first stanza:

> ˘ ˘ / /
> In the bright-lit
> ˘ / ˘ / ˘
> laboratory
> ˘ / ˘ / ˘
> the coloured liquids

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[8] Some of this correspondence has been published in A Literary Friendship: The Correspondence of Ralph Gustafson and W. W. E. Ross (1984), edited and introduced by Bruce Whiteman, and in a collection edited by Michael Darling and published in an issue of Essays on Canadian Writing, "On Poetry and Poets: The Letters of W. W. E. Ross to A. J. M. Smith" (1979-80).

/ ˘ ˘ /
glow in the light;
/ ˘ ˘ / ˘
liquids in bottles,
˘ / ˘ ˘ / ˘
or test-tubes or beakers,
˘ / ˘ / ˘
of many colours,
˘ / ˘ /
or water-clear. (1-8)

A variety of metrical feet tumble over each other in this stanza. In the first line, an anapest ("In the bright-") receives an echo from an extra stressed foot ("-lit") that results from the omission of the "-ly" adverbial ending of "brightly." The second and third lines each consist of an iamb ("labor" and "the co-") and an amphibrach ("-atory" and "-loured liquids"), while trochaic and iambic feet bring the fourth line to a momentary rest ("glow in the light"), which is punctuated with a semi-colon. The fifth line, consisting of a trochee and another amphibrach ("liquids in bottles"), is followed by a line of amphibrachic dimeter ("or test-tubes or beakers"), and another that consists of one more amphibrach ("of many") and a trochee ("colours"), reversing the pattern of the fifth line. The stanza comes to a rest in a final line of iambic dimeter ("or water clear"). From these whirling rhythms emerges a pattern in which lines of plain, daily speech each contain two stressed syllables. As this methodical pattern is countered by the irregular succession of metrical feet, Ross's laboratory technicians, like other scientists, work methodically to find something new. They search, among small objects and basic sensory elements, for what will be described in a subsequent stanza as "the mystery / of measured matter." Ironically, it is the images of empirical reality and its sensory details--the liquids and their light and colours--that evoke a sense of a irrational mystery, or an elusive reality.

Like "The Saws Were Shrieking," "Laboratory" exemplifies an aesthetic which, through its rhythms, sparse lines, exact words, and the thoughts of physical sensations that they prompt, generates a vision of the world that is inaccessible to other modes of discourse. Aspects of experienced reality are in motion and, therefore, their truth is mutable and contingent. These fragments of reality can be glimpsed, but not fixed, in the lines and images that serve as a poem's test-tubes and beakers. In this respect, Ross's poems resemble impressionist painting. They shift our attention away from the direct treatment of elements of a landscape or moments in human experience, to perspectives generated by Ross's attention to selected, sensory detail. They also parallel elements of Cubism, a movement in painting during the first two decades of the twentieth century whose geometrical figures and collages signal a departure from representational art. Cubism turned painting into commentary about art by analysing the three-dimensional nature of an object within the two-dimensional planes of a canvas. Ross isolates particular glimpses of an aesthetic truth--or beauty--and of the nature of poetry, and organizes them to create new perceptions of a reality that cannot be reduced to the lines of his poems. His laboratory workers look for "the mystery / of measured matter," or "the strict exactness / of the proportions," but they find only "coloured liquids" that "glow in the light" (21-24); Ross's is an aesthetic of fragmented and fleeting perceptions.

II

The argument that the works of Ross and the McGill poets represent two strains of Modernism assumes their aesthetics are specific kinds of knowledge and that Modernism is a multifaceted aesthetic. A point of departure for these ideas is Brian Trehearne's distinction between Aestheticism and Modernism. A broader meaning of "aesthetic," however, reaches back to the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries and points to important features of the aesthetic of Modernism and its divergent strains in Canadian poetry.

Trehearne investigates the influence of the nineteenth-century Aesthetic movement on such Canadian Modernists as Ross, Smith, and Scott; he also studies the poems of Knister and John Glassco (1909-81). It is, argues Trehearne, their belated use of the themes, symbols, imagery, diction, and forms of Aestheticism and Decadence that makes the Canadian version of modernist poetry unique (3). His argument highlights creative currents at work in Canada during the first decades of the twentieth century. It depends, however, on a sharp distinction between the Aesthetic movement of the 1880s and high Modernism. A "late and rarefied development of English Romanticism" (13), Aestheticism is, for Trehearne, one of Modernism's precursors, not one of its expressions. Aesthetic concepts, however, cannot be reduced to the Aesthetes's idealization of beauty and their affected speech, dress, and behaviour. Furthermore, although their prosody and their cry of "art for art's sake" continued elements of a Romantic aesthetic, the Aesthetes also participated in Modernism's revolt against the late Romanticism of the Victorians. Aestheticism's affectations and extravagances, exemplified in the extreme by Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), were, like later modernist expressions, declarations of art's independence. They were also protests against the expectation that art should give voice to a society's dominant moral values and its prevailing perceptions of what constitutes reality. With Modernism, the Aesthetic movement shares Romanticism's post-Enlightenment protest; it points to a concept of the aesthetic as a distinct way of knowing the world.

In Aestheticism (1973), R. V. Johnson argues that the modern concept of aestheticism surfaces in the nineteenth century. The term, he says, "denoted something new: not merely a devotion to beauty, but a new conviction of the importance of beauty as compared with--and even in opposition to--other values" (1). A perception of the aesthetic as a distinct mode of thought develops, however, in the eighteenth century. In Introduction to Aesthetics (1997), George Dickie examines changing theories of beauty and art, and of twentieth-century concepts of aesthetics. He reminds us that the idea of beauty had already changed dramatically before Romanticism. "Whereas earlier philosophers had discussed only the nature of beauty," he writes, "eighteenth-century thinkers began to be interested in additional concepts: the sublime, the picturesque, and so on" (3). In their essay, "The Necessity and Irreformability of Aesthetic" (1986), Ferenc Fehér and Agnes Heller might agree with this historical framework, but they suggest a more specific context. Aestheticism as an independent philosophical enquiry, they propose, is both "the product of bourgeois society" in the eighteenth century and a means of envisioning alternatives to that society (1).

In his history of aesthetics in The Oxford Companion to Philosophy (1995), Joseph Margolis provides a context for the development of a modern understanding of the discipline. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and his influential Critique of Judgement (1790), argues Margolis, signal a new way of understanding the aesthetic (9). Reflections on the nature of art, of course, predate Kant but such reflections were dependent on other aspects of philosophical enquiry. To generalize, aesthetic discussions were philosophy's questions about beauty, tragedy, and the sublime. Discussions begun by Socrates (469-399 BCE), Plato (c. 428-347 BCE), and Plotinus (c. 203-63 CE) about form and mimesis,[9] and about the relationship between the moral behaviour of artists and their art, were continued by, among others, Augustine (354-430) and Aquinas (c. 1225-74). These lines of thought influenced Renaissance ideas about art. Kant's ideas mark a new approach by establishing aesthetics as a distinct and critical philosophy.

According to Margolis, Kant's argument departs from earlier aesthetics. Beauty does not exist independently in reality, "out there" to be uncovered or imitated, but is generated through critical judgement (9). Beauty is a contingent value for aesthetic activity creates a particular knowledge of the world; it does not discover something inherent within it. Some of Kant's ideas have been more influential than others. His concepts of universal judgements, disinterested pleasure, and beauty had little influence on later criticism of the arts, but Romanticism took up his ideas about the sublime (9). Useful today in formulating a retrospective understanding of a modernist aesthetic, however, is Kant's concept of the aesthetic as reflexive judgement. Art, in other words, contributes to our knowledge of the world by aestheticising it, rather than by understanding it through reason or ethics. In her book, Practising Postmodernism Reading Modernism, Waugh uses this concept to position Romanticism, Modernism, and Postmodernism in a continuing genealogy of aestheticising thought that reflects a continuing revolt against the Enlightenment (3).

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[9] The relationship of art to the natural environment, social structures, and human experience has been a constant source of debate in Western thought. One view of the concept of representation concerns a relationship in which art stands in for something external to art that is not present, or that cannot be perceived without aesthetic intervention. Plato, suspicious of the attempt of artists to create imitations of Ideal Forms, dismissed such attempts as mimetic. For Aristotle, who considered artists brokers of universal truths rather than counterfeiters of reality, mimesis refers to the representation of the natural order of reality we encounter in life. The concept has influenced various critical approaches and ideas from the time of the Enlightenment to contemporary Postmodernism.

Fehér and Heller are concerned with the origins of a particular branch of philosophy in the eighteenth century and with its deductive and inductive functions. Their interest lies in the possibilities for the social criticism arising from aesthetics, or "the theory of art of bourgeois society" (8), particularly in view of what they regard as critical judgements that are overdetermined by "an unavoidable world-historical situation of the modern age" (20-21). Their opening remarks about the origins of the modern idea of aestheticism offer a helpful perspective on that concept. Aesthetic activity is an alternative means of understanding human experience: "it is not a by-product of other types of activities, not a mediating vehicle of various ideologies, not a maid-servant of theology and religious belief, and not an articulation of communal self-consciousness, but independent of all these (though perhaps expressive of some of them), it is a self-reliant activity" (1-2). As a specialized philosophical discipline, aesthetics emerges in the eighteenth century to provide critical points of reference that may do two things. They can generate substitutes for earlier ideas in which art reflects social ideals, or they configure aesthetic expressions as something other than commodities. The latter role is echoed in the twentieth century by Smith who, in "Wanted--Canadian Criticism," is concerned with a literary climate of the 1920s in which the "serious writer" faces a "confusion between commerce and art." The "temptation with which the devil has assailed the Canadian Authors' Association," the bastion, it would seem, of late Canadian Romanticism, is that of ceasing "to be an artist" and becoming "a merchant" in the employ of "poor imitations of the Saturday Evening Post who pay handsomely" (600).

In the bourgeois society that develops in the eighteenth century and continues into the twentieth century with the rise of empirical science, colonial activity, and technological developments, art becomes separated from the rest of life. Yet, as Fehér and Heller argue, "the need for art does exist, and exactly as a need for a 'counter-image' of a given everyday life" (3). This view of art as a means of creating counter-images, or as a mode of cultural resistance, can sometimes be distorted by ideological stances based on the assumption that incoherent heteroglossia is inevitable. There are no reasonably certain points of reference, and reality is merely a kaleidoscope of subjective perceptions; ultimately, no subject can understand, or be understood by, another. However, the idea that art may counter unexamined givens of social values and assumptions does not necessarily lead to a postmodern Babel. In the escalating violence, alienation, and stifling cultural standardization that mark the twentieth century, the concept of art as a counterforce makes possible the recovery of diverse perspectives threatened by the oppressive claims of dominant conventions. In their own ways, Smith and Ross quietly counter the prevailing claims of the "Maple Leaf" poetasters concerning the nature of poetic discourse, its forms, and its appropriate subjects. Ross's poetry is not part of an aggressively rebellious, "in-your-face"--to use an apposite contemporary colloquialism--strand of Modernism, such as that of Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), the British Aesthetes, or the Vorticism of the English quarterly, Blast, which was edited by Wyndham Lewis (1882-1915). Instead, Ross's paradoxical aesthetic represents a modest challenge to a dominant aesthetic in Canadian poetry at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The modernist aesthetic was part of wider philosophical and cultural developments towards the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth. Perceptions of Modernism, however, have been almost as numerous as its expressions. It has been defined as an avant-garde break with a formulaic and moralistic aesthetic of the nineteenth century. It has also been interpreted as an aesthetic that, because it privileges the work of art and makes the production of beauty an end in itself, divorces art from social reality and becomes an elitist knowledge. In Europe, Modernism ceased to have a creative influence during the 1930s and 1940s. It became possible, therefore, to look back later and try to fix a definition. "We can take some comfort," announced Maurice Beebe in "What Modernism Was" (1974), "in the realization that we can now define Modernism with confidence that we shall not have to keep adjusting our definition in order to accommodate new vision and value" (1065). Beebe's comment summarizes earlier developments of critical perceptions of Modernism, but Modernism's aesthetics have not proven easy to define.

A "new vision" of Modernism was suggested by Harold Bloom in the same year in which Beebe made his statement. "Modernism in literature," Bloom announces in "The Dialectics of Literary Tradition" (1974), "has not passed; it has been exposed as never having been there" (529). Bloom's concern is with the tendency of criticism to turn selected examples of literary activity into a canonical dogma that overlooks other activities. Modernism, he suggests, is a postmodern literary construct. It is a name applied to earlier aesthetic practices and, as a name, it serves to fix a definition of those practices at the risk of erasing halting and divergent forms of those aesthetic practices. Bloom criticises what he calls the "stifling or blocking" tendencies of critical conventions (529). His statement that Modernism "has been exposed as never having been there," therefore, does not try to erase the avant-garde experiments of the latter part of the nineteenth, and the early decades of the twentieth, centuries. Rather, his words function in a role similar to those of the girl in the famous tale by Hans Christian Andersen (1805-75), "The Emperor's New Clothes"; the term "Modernism" is a illusionary construct in which critics have sought to clothe, or mystify, their assessments of earlier literary practices.

Bloom's statement is not a denial of the aesthetic value of Modernism but a rejection of perceptions of Modernism as an monolithic or reactionary force. In a statement about theory that could be applied to the aesthetic activities of Postmodernism, Waugh reaffirms the presence of Modernism, denying Beebe his comfort and redefining Modernism as part of an on-going aestheticising activity. "Postmodern theory," she argues, "can be seen and understood as the latest version of a long-standing attempt to address social and political issues through an aestheticised view of the world, though it may be more thoroughly aestheticising than any previous body of thought" (6). Not all expressions of Modernism are as overtly aestheticising as Waugh's comment might imply, but early Canadian modernist poetry offers a new understanding of the nature of reality and of human experience. It counters the ideals and unexamined assumptions of a strain of Romanticism that had abandoned the quest to reshape our knowledge of the world, but which prevailed in Canadian poetry at the beginning of the twentieth century.

III

The differing approaches of Ken Norris, Frank Davey, D. M. R. Bentley, and other critics appear to have at least two points in common that contribute to our understanding of a Canadian modernist aesthetic. Norris argues that modernist poetry begins in Canada with The McGill Daily Literary Supplement, which Smith and Scott founded in 1924 while they were students at McGill and which they developed into The McGill Fortnightly Review (1925-1927). The short-lived Review was succeeded by The Canadian Mercury, an even more ephemeral journal that will be explored in Chapter 3.

In "The Beginnings of Canadian Modernism," Norris contends that it is "the rise of the little magazine that would serve as the breeding ground for the true initiation of Modernism in Canada and the subsequent schools and innovations" (57). The preferences of Smith and Scott for traditional forms and for rhyme and measured rhythm raise a question about where we are to find Modernism's experimental aesthetic in their work. Norris locates traces of the Modernism that shaped Smith's and Scott's poetry in three developments: their move away from Victorian poetic language and towards contemporary speech (61), their rejection of poetry "weighted down by a transplanted Victorian tradition living out a protracted decadence in Canada," and their adoption of the poetics of W. B. Yeats (1865-1939), T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), and the Imagists (59). In his chapter on Canadian Modernists in Louis Dudek and Raymond Souster (1980), Frank Davey makes an argument similar to that of Norris. He suggests that Modernism entered Canadian poetry through the work of Smith and Scott as they edited The McGill Fortnightly Review and through poets whose work was published in this magazine. In Davey's view, the McGill aesthetic shows the influence of a classicist, high Modernism and its

> rejection of humanism, of democratic taste, of commercialism, of technology, of verbal imprecision and excess, as well as a preference for the traditional over the contemporary, for order over chance process, for

> abstraction over realism, for literary detachment over advocacy and for irony and symbol over emotional expressionism. (160)

A similar perspective is represented in D. M. R. Bentley's "The Nth Adam: Modernism and the Transcendence of Canada" (1992). Bentley proposes that it was Smith's essay of 1928, "Wanted--Canadian Criticism," and the responses it generated from Scott and others, that established Modernism in Canadian poetry. Smith and the McGill group produced an aesthetic that would dominate Canadian poetry and its criticism for decades. It consists, writes Bentley, of

> a deep ambivalence towards the Canadian environment and its representation in poetry and an aggressive insistence on alignment with a tradition that is not of this country and, therefore, not "obvious or shallow" but difficult (even esoteric) and profound--the critical and poetic tradition, it will transpire, of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, I. A. Richards, Stephen Spender, W. H. Auden, and other high Modernists. (252)

Smith and Scott become, in Bentley's essay, representatives of Canadian Modernism; he summarizes his definition of their aesthetic and, at the same time, discloses his attitude towards it. "It would be cheering," he writes, "to think that Smith and Scott stood alone even among Canadian high Modernists in their rejection of the local and natural in favour of the universal and artificial" (268). Bentley's argument is misleading, especially in Scott's case. Smith's avowed preference for a "cosmopolitan," rather than "native," poetry notwithstanding, the poetry which the McGill movement and Ross sought to create steps aside from an aesthetic informed by preconceived ideas and poetic values, affective description, and references to stock descriptions of the Canadian landscape.

Smith's Modernism, Davey suggests, dominated Canadian poetry in the 1940s. Influential it certainly was, for Smith was an energetic and multifaceted person: a poet, critic, anthologist, teacher, and promoter of the idea that Canadian poets could create their own traditions. His early poems in The McGill Fortnightly Review, however, as Trehearne reminds us, reflect a derivative Romanticism and the literary values of the nineteenth century (235); they anticipate modernism only as they reflect Smith's struggle to depart from the Victorian aesthetics that both mark his earliest poetry and continue to dominate Canadian poetry in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Not until the publication of New Provinces would the McGill poets and their associates be recognized as modernists. Much earlier, however, in the prefaces to their collections, both Stringer and Call advocated the development of free verse as a new point of departure for Canadian poetry. There are also anticipations of Modernism in the work of Pickthall and that of the Confederation Poets;[9] some of their poetry experiments with form, line, and language in search of a post-Victorian aesthetic. The poetics practised by the McGill poets in the early part of the twentieth century[10] were already being looked for towards the end of the nineteenth century. In such a context, the significance of the short-lived journals Smith and Scott established, is twofold. First, as Norris makes clear, they served as vehicles through which the McGill poets expressed their ideas about Anglo-American modernist developments and argued for a new kind of Canadian poetry to replace the lingering remnants of Romantic and Victorian practices. Second, in these journals we find a poetry caught between the aesthetic it wants to replace and the creation of its own aesthetic. The Montreal revolt against a version of Canadian Romanticism and what it represented, as exemplified in MacDonald's poetry,[11] is not only anticipated, however; it is also accompanied by a different, though related, strain of a modernist aesthetic, as manifested in Ross's poetry.

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[9] Malcolm Ross's edition of Poets of the Confederation (1960) gave birth to the concept of a group of Confederation Poets. He includes Carman, Archibald Lampman, Roberts, and Duncan Campbell Scott (1862-1947), although Wilfred Campbell (1860-1918), George Frederick Cameron (1854-85), and Isabella Valancy Crawford (1850-87) are also sometimes included.

[10] Kennedy's first collection of poems, The Shrouding, appeared in 1933 and, after the publication in 1936 of some of their poems in the first anthology of Canadian modernist poetry, New Provinces, other McGill poets began to bring out their own collections. Smith's News of the Phoenix and Other Poems (1943) was followed by Klein's The Hitleriad (1944) and Poems (1944), Scott's Overture (1945), and Finch's Poems (1946). Pratt's poems in New Provinces are those of a poet whose career is well under way, not beginning; several collections of his verse had already been published, including The Titanic (1935), and more were to follow, including The Fable of the Goats and Other Poems (1937) and his narrative, Canadian epic, Brébeuf and His Brethren (1941). This flowering of volumes of modernist poetry in the 1930s and 1940s should not obscure the fact that poems of the McGill poets appeared in the 1920s and 1930s in a wide variety of Canadian and foreign magazines.

As Dudek and Gnarowski argue, critics too often assume that "the modern idiom in Canadian poetry sprang fully blown from the editorial brow of A. J. M. Smith and F. R. Scott, both guiding spirits behind The McGill Fortnightly Review" ("Precursors" 3). Trehearne, however, reminds us that the Review was not a fountain of modernist poetry in Canada. He attacks critics who, "because of the attractiveness of the myth," regard it "as the vehicle in which a number of brave young Modernists published their defiance of the Victorian literary scene [. . .] with their flamboyant wit and vigorous opinions" (233). The pages of the short-lived journal, Trehearne points out, contain poems by Kennedy, Scott, and Smith that express a derivative Romanticism and the Decadence and Aestheticism of the nineteenth-century (233-35). He distinguishes between these early movements and the full-blown, or high, Modernism of James Joyce (1882-1941), Marcel Proust (1871-1922), Ezra Pound (1885-1972), and Eliot (234). If, however, Waugh is right to suggest that Romanticism, Modernism, and Postmodernism represent related expressions of an aestheticised view of the world, then Trehearne's definitions are unsatisfactorily unambiguous. His is too tidy a distinction. In Trehearne's view, Aestheticism is a late development of Romanticism, and Decadence a strain of the

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[11] MacDonald, who was widely read and who made reading tours as late as the 1960s, was an epigone; he was a belated Romantic. In Smith's opinion, expressed in "Wanted--Canadian Criticism," MacDonald is a good poet who is also "praised for the wrong things, and seems likely to succumb to the blandishments of an unfortunate popularity, the sort of popularity that appears to be at the command of any poet who hammers a vigorous rhythm out of an abundant assortment of french and indian placenames [sic]" (600). MacDonald's volumes of poems, such as A Flagon of Beauty (1931), do not aestheticise the world or create new concepts of beauty. Rather, they recollect vague landscapes (the "unbearable wastes of a marsh," from the title poem of this collection, for example) in a quest to uncover a beauty the poet is privileged to discern and share with his readers. There is much colour and a Romantic sense of musicality--the "swan-moving curves of the seas" and "wind-wandered leagues of the wild" ("A Flagon" 13-14)--but it is a dead Romanticism, an aesthetic that has no doubts about the reality it apprehends or about its own expression of that reality.

Aesthetic Movement (13). Aestheticism's declaration of the independence of art, however, makes it one of the early experiments that contributed to the varied strands of Modernism's aesthetic.

The roots of Aestheticism include the disinterested aesthetic of Kant and his Critique of Judgement, as well as a proposal by Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49) in "The Poetic Principle" (1849) that a poem is "written solely for the poem's sake" (38). They also include an argument by Théophile Gautier (1811-72) that art has a value of its own because, by any other standard, it is useless. "Un livre," Gautier writes in a manifesto-like preface to his novel, Mademoiselle de Maupin (1835), "ne fait pas de la soupe à la gélatine [a book cannot make a gelatin soup.]" The structure and dynamics of literature have their own value because they are of no value to industry, and they are not among the requirements of daily existence:

> un roman n'est pas une paire de bottes sans couture; un sonnet, une seringue à jet continu; un drame n'est pas un chemin de fer, toutes choses essentiellement civilisantes, et faisant marcher l'humanité dans la voie du progrès [. . .]. On ne se fait pas un bonnet de coton du'une métonymie, on ne chausse pas une comparaison en guise de pantoffle; on ne se peut servir d'un antithèse pour parapluie; malheureusment, on ne saurait se plaquer sur le ventre quelques rimes bariolées en manière de gilet. (42-43)
> [A novel is not a pair of seamless boots, nor is a sonnet a continuously flowing syringe; a play is not a railroad--all things essential to civilization which send humanity along the road of progress [. . .]. We do not make a cotton bonnet from a metonymy; we do not put on similes as though they were slippers; nor can we use an antithesis as an umbrella. Unfortunately, we would not know how to plaster our bellies with gaily coloured rhymes as if they were waistcoats. (my translation)]

Expressions of art for art's own sake, whether Gautier's colourful statement or those of the British Aesthetes, signal a shift from Romanticism's vision of art as a way to uncover hidden truth and beauty. Declaring art's independence, Aestheticism rebuffs philosophical analysis and moral didacticism. The Aesthetic movement is both an intensification of Romanticism's aesthetic knowledge of the world and a departure from Romanticism's visions of beauty, truth, and universality.

Trehearne argues that one of Aestheticism's experiments is Decadence. Taking a different approach, Jean Pierrot's The Decadent Imagination (1981) links Decadence with Modernism in that Decadence separates itself from classical aesthetics and the goal of imitating nature; art exists for its own sake and in opposition to nature (11). Decadence was a protest against naturalism.[12] It was also a critique of the objectivity of the Parnassians[13] and of their erasure of the poet's personality. Just as the Decadents bridged Romanticism and an emerging Modernism, the Beat poets and other expressions of the counterculture in the 1950s and 1960s link late Modernism with Postmodernism. These poets at the end of Modernism, like the early-modernist Aesthetes and Decadents, protest by experimenting with form and language.

Aestheticism and Decadence resemble the proverbial half-full, half-empty glass: they may be regarded as diminished forms of Romanticism or as early experiments in Modernism. Their rejection of an aesthetic that mimics reality and identifies beauty as that truth contained in art, together with their quests for the irrational, link them with the dreams, fantasy, and imagination of Romanticism. A pursuit of artificiality, both in poetry and in life, however, and Decadence's desire for what Pierrot describes as "an artistic purity that practical considerations could only sully" (240), look, as does Aestheticism, towards Modernism's valorization of art and its sense that something important has been lost. It is a perspective parallelled in Pound's own criticism, in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" (1920), of the commodification of art:

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[12] Naturalism, a term often used synonymously with realism, from which it developed, provided an aesthetic vision of reality in which everything in existence is regarded as natural and may be known as one perceives material, rather than supernatural or spiritual, causes.

[13] The Parnassians were a group of French poets who, during the last decades of the nineteenth century, rebelled against Romanticism and subjective aesthetics.

> The "age demanded" a mould in plaster,
> Made with no loss of time,
> A prose kinema, not, not assuredly, alabaster
> Or the "sculpture" of rhyme. (Selected Poems 62)

Pierrot argues that the Decadents threw "themselves heart and soul into [a] desperate quest for the new." They pushed poetry to its limits and, as the centre of a new aesthetic, replaced life's exigencies with art and its artifice (10). In continuity with Romanticism, Decadence--and the Aestheticism of which it was part--struggled to replace what had become late expressions of Romanticism with a self-conscious cultivation of sensory perceptions and a proliferation of aesthetic values. Not simply late strains of Romanticism's aesthetic, Aestheticism and Decadence presented views of the world and human experience that only an aestheticising perspective could conceptualize. Although they failed to make new the formal practices through which they expressed their perspective, they were early experiments with a modernist aesthetic.

In such a varied field, where are we to locate Canadian Modernism? Is it distinct from other early experiments in literary Modernism? Were Smith and Glassco representatives of Aestheticism rather than the Modernism of Eliot and Pound? Did they also weld a late expression of Romanticism to a full-blown Modernism? Dudek and Gnarowski locate Modernism's earliest expressions in the prefaces Stringer and Call write to their poems, but they do not ask how these expressions compare with the poetry of Smith, Scott, and The McGill Fortnightly Review. While Trehearne rightly points out that the Review was not really a modernist journal, he also argues that to label the McGill movement and other poets "modernist" is to overlook the extent to which they were influenced by Aestheticism and reproduced its poetics.

Aestheticism is better understood as an early modernist experiment and a harbinger of another influence on the Montreal poets, the high Modernism of Pound, Joyce, and Eliot. To locate the beginnings of Canadian Modernism in the work of the McGill poets, or to distinguish between the engagement of these poets with high Modernism and the influence upon them of an earlier aesthetic, is to overlook the presence among them of a different strain of Modernism. As Chapter 3 will discuss more fully, Ross, by profession a scientist, reconfigures the world and human experience as aesthetic moments that cannot be glimpsed by scientific or other modes of rational thought. Here is the paradoxical nature of his Modernism. Modernism shared Romanticism's faith in the ability of art to discern and articulate a view of experience that we cannot perceive through reasoned or ethical discourse. This does not mean, however, that Modernism represents, inherently, a withdrawal from the world and from ethical, political, or utilitarian implications. Its understanding of these implications is self-consciously aesthetic and paradoxical: it expresses fleeting glimpses of a mutable world by aestheticising human experience, but the truth of those glimpses cannot be contained within such expressions.

Like modernist aesthetics generally, Ross's paradoxical aesthetic signals a shift away from the perception of beauty as that truth inherent in nature or human experience. It is a way of thinking about the world by aestheticising it, by openly creating, instead of claiming to find, a sense of meaning. It points beyond itself, suggesting that its words and images can, at best, only partially express the nature or meaning of the reality that these words and images enable us to perceive. Sensory metaphors, the prosody of Imagism, and a mistrust of its own words and forms, are elements of this aesthetic. It bridges experience and image to place perceived reality in apposition to the imagination of alternatives. The presence of a paradoxical strain of Modernism signifies a diversity of early Canadian modernist approaches. These approaches enabled the McGill poets, and Ross, to break the continuing hold of Victorian convention; their poetry attacks a "maple leaf" poetry, or a parochial and outworn aesthetic.

CHAPTER 2

WANTED--A CANADIAN MODERNIST AESTHETIC: THE POETRY OF THE CANADIAN MERCURY

> Amber opaque are autumn skies--
> And autumn trees and autumn men
> Are as so many captured weeds
> And as so many fossiled flies . . . .
>
> A. M. Klein, "Fixity"

In the final issue of The Canadian Mercury (June 1929), a review by F. R. Scott of Carman's Wild Garden (1929) indicates some of the qualities the McGill poets wanted to see in a new kind of poetry. It describes the aesthetic against which Canadian Modernism emerged. Scott's review is an attack on the latest collection of verse by Carman who, in the 1920s, was a popular Canadian poet:

> Carman's technique and form is [sic] undiluted 1880; he appears impervious to change. He has no conception of rhythm, but only metrical accuracy. So bound is he by discarded rules of scansion that if he wishes to use the word "jesting" and another syllable is required, he writes "a-jesting," as in the lines
>
> She might have walked with Chaucer
> A-jesting all the way.
>
> We also find "a-dream," and a host of these "poetical" words so beloved of Victorian minor poets . . . joyance, wondrous, beauteous, lovesome. In the whole volume there is not an idea, a metaphor, an adjective, that did not have the last drop of emotional content squeezed out of it before the beginning of this century. ("Wild Garden" 140)

The review repudiates a poetic style as antiquated in the era of Art Deco[14] furniture as a Victorian antimacassar. It was, however, a style which, as Carman's popularity suggests, continued to mark Canadian poetry in the early decades of the twentieth century. Scott's perspective is repeated later by George Woodcock. In his introduction to Canadian Writers and Their Works (1983), Woodcock takes up a famous image from the conclusion to The Renaissance (1873) by Walter Pater (1839-34) (152), and argues that, although Carman's poetry sometimes "projects a clear, hard flame," in much of it "light is diffused in the vague language and unfocused imagery" (2.23).

Scott's criticism of Carman's technique, rhythm, and diction in the poems of Wild Garden is part of a broader attack by poets of the McGill movement against an aesthetic that had been established by the Confederation poets. In his essay, "Rejected Preface," Smith begins by identifying the prevailing style of Canadian poetry with John Ruskin's pathetic fallacy and limited, predictable techniques: "[i]ts two great themes are nature and love--nature humanized, endowed with feeling, and made sentimental; love idealized, sanctified, and inflated. Its characteristic type is the lyric. Its rhythms are definite, mechanically correct, and obvious; its rhymes are commonplace" (16). Kennedy, in "The Future of Canadian Literature" (1929), published in the issue of The Canadian Mercury that precedes the one in which Scott's review appears, names Roberts and Wilfred Campbell as examples of a "casual aesthetic" and a "restricted outlook" (99). The attack, however, was not directed so much against the best work of the Confederation poets as against a decaying style. The verses in Wild Garden, after all, were produced by someone who, in Scott's judgement, had "written as good poetry as anyone in this country" (140). The Modernism that entered Canadian poetry through the magazines and verses of the McGill poets was intended to create a new aesthetic, deliberate and self-conscious rather than "casual," innovative and experimental in its prosody and outlook rather than "restricted" or "impervious to change," and more sparing and colloquial in its diction than the overblown prose "so beloved of minor Victorian poets." Canadian Modernism arose to displace a lingering strain of Romanticism.

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[14] The term "Art Deco," which, since the 1960s, has replaced the earlier designation, "Art Moderne," refers to an international, geometric and rectilinear style of design that influenced painting, architecture, furniture design, and fashion during the 1920s (Sayre 361-63).

This strain is an aesthetic in which the broadening of poetic subject matter by the Romantics and their innovative use of language, subjectivity, and conventional prosody are reduced to statements of Victorian ethical and religious ideals and to an outpouring of putative emotion. "Remembering Ishtar" (1929), by Ivan McNeil, one of the contributors to The Canadian Mercury, provides a good illustration:

> In nakedness is god-head understood--
> I shall walk naked on the hills to-night,
> With stars like bubbles in my started blood,
> Knowing god-wisdom and a god's delight.
>
> One with the sea-slug and the elephant,
> I shall kiss trees and press with strange surmise
> Upon outcast immensities that haunt
> This muffled body's dreaming of bare skies.
>
> Fate wars in vain on unconditioned flesh--
> Unbounded by the dark of high lands.
> I shall touch god-head in my nakedness,
> And cup infinity in quiet hands.

The poem echoes, albeit far less eloquently, the aphorism with which Blake begins his "Auguries of Innocence" (1803):

> To see a World in a Grain of Sand
> And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
> Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
> And Eternity in an hour. (ll. 1-4)

McNeil also uses cross-rhymed quatrains of iambic pentameter, which Romantic and Victorian poets from Blake to Roberts use effectively to develop their themes and images. In McNeil's hands, however, these elements cannot achieve the sharp, metonymic images of Blake. Instead, there is a vague expression of harmony with nature, the significance of which is feebly alluded to in the picture of infinity cupped in quiet hands. An image of walking naked at night with a divine delight might seem to reverse Adam's predicament in Genesis, but the metaphor neither attacks nor profoundly echoes Victorian expressions of Christianity; it is merely pretentious. With its expression of unity with a seaslug and with an elephant (in the same landscape, no less), and with its reference to an erotic encounter with a tree, "Remembering Ishtar" does not create a thoughtful meditation prompted, as in both Augustan and Romantic poetry, by a description of a natural setting; rather, the poem is merely precious, effusing nebulous feelings and confusing pagan mythology with Jewish and Christian traditions.

Late Canadian Romanticism echoes the poetry of Wordsworth (1770-1850), Coleridge (1772-1834), Byron (1788-1824) and Keats (1795-1821), and its development by Victorian poets like Tennyson (1809-1892). In his Prelude (1850), for example, Wordsworth describes a childhood experience in which a storm that arises while he is boating on a lake kindles guilt about his theft of the boat, and prompts reflections about the mental processes by which images of nature are recalled (ll. 357-400). The strain of Romanticism present in Canadian poetry in the 1920s, and exemplified by McNeil's poem, also gives attention to nature, but the practice of describing elements of the landscape in order to articulate new perspectives on human experience, emotion, and thought is replaced by vague references, clichéd themes, and saccharine diction. "Phantasy," a poem by another contributor to The Canadian Mercury, K. N. Cameron, offers up "Weary-winged" ravens "between black sea and sky,"and a nebulous sense of "some weary planet, full / Of silence and a war despair / Passed" (5-6). It is what Woodcock calls, in "Turning New Leaves" (1963), "half-baked pseudo-Romantic" poetry (124). An apposite summary of this strain of late Canadian Romanticism can be found in Munro Beattie's contribution to Klinck's Literary History of Canada (1976), "Poetry

1920-1935." "Versifiers of this arid period," he writes,

> kept up a constant jejune chatter about infinity, licit love, devotion to the Empire, death, Beauty, God, and Nature. Sweet singers of the Canadian out-of-doors, they peered into flowers, reported on the flittings of the birds, discerned mystic voices in the wind, descried elves among the poplars. They insisted on being seen and overheard in poetic postures: watching for the will-o'-the-wisp, eavesdropping on "the forest streamlet's noonday song," lying like a mermaid on a bed of coral, examining a bird's nest in winter, fluting for the fairies to dance, or "wandering through some silent forest's aisles." (2. 235)

The implication of Beattie's scorn is that Romanticism's revolutionary interest in everyday reality, genuine feelings, and the irrational, and its use of classical mythology, folklore, fantasy, or altered states of consciousness had been displaced in much of the Canadian poetry of the 1920s and 1930s by trite and pretty images, undefined natural objects, artificial affect, and vapid ideas. Smith's "Rejected Preface" singles out Wilfred Campbell's Oxford Book of Canadian Verse (1913) and John Garvin's Canadian Poets (1916; 1926), describing the former as a "mortuary" containing a "great dead body of poetry" and the latter as a collection of "florid epitaphs" (17). Beattie argues that Garvin's anthology "abundantly demonstrates that poetry in Canada as the 1920s opened was dying of emotional and intellectual anemia" (235). Glickman argues that both anthologies deserve a better evaluation because they contain poetry that does not fit Smith's description (235). Though Glickman's contention is reasonable, it remains that Smith's arguments, together with those of Kennedy and Scott, and their critical guardians, including Beattie and Woodcock, for example, disclose the modernist aesthetic with which the McGill poets hoped to replace a lingering and lifeless form of Romanticism.

In this context, this chapter offers an examination, not of the anthologies of Campbell or Garvin, but of The Canadian Mercury, a journal established at a crucial moment in the development of Canadian modernist poetry. It illustrates both the

Romanticism rejected by the McGill poets and the modernist aesthetic they wanted to establish. The first section will argue that The Canadian Mercury exemplifies a response to Stringer's earlier call for a new aesthetic and identify characteristics of the strain of Canadian Modernism for which the journal was a vehicle. Through a close reading of poems by three contributors, Margaret Muir, N. W. Hainsworth, and Erica Selfridge,[15] a second section will examine what the McGill poets wanted to move towards by delineating the aesthetic they wanted to replace.[16] The strain of Modernism that emerges in The Canadian Mercury poems of Smith, Kennedy, and Scott will be the subject of a third section in this chapter.

Within two years of the final issue of The Canadian Mercury, Roberts expressed his opinions about modernist poetry in "A Note on Modernism" (1931). "Of a sudden," he writes in what may be regarded as an apposite description, "'modernism' was upon us--a chaos of startling, elusive beauty and defiant ugliness, of strange, wild harmonies and ear-splitting dissonances, [and] of stark simplicities and grotesquely unintelligible obscurities" (297). Generally, Roberts disparages the violent, aggressive aesthetic of European Modernists, although he applauds the "reaction of the younger creators against the too long dominance of their older predecessors" (296). He also describes the movement towards Modernism by Canadian poets as a kind of dance step that nicely points to the modernist aesthetic surfacing in the pages of The Canadian Mercury:

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[15] Other than the McGill poets represented in The Canadian Mercury, I have been unable to find information about the dates of birth or other publications by the contributors to this journal. These contributors are minor figures in the Canadian literary landscape; their poems in The Canadian Mercury, however, provide good examples of the prevailing aesthetic in 1928 and 1929 and, in some cases, of the desire, evidenced in the contributions of the McGill poets, to replace it with a new kind of poetry.

[16] Two poems by A. M. Klein also appear in The Canadian Mercury, "Fixity" (1929) and "Haunted House" (1929). Except for a brief reference about "Fixity," a poem which also serves as the epigraph for this chapter, these poems will not be discussed. The uneven quality of "Haunted House," a long poem which is reprinted in volume one of Klein's Complete Poems (1990), does not adequately attest to the rich intertextuality and complex Modernism of Klein's poetry.

> To Canada modernism has come more slowly and less violently than elsewhere. This applies more particularly to poetry, and indeed to literature in general. The older generation of Canadian poets, Carman and Scott--and Lampman in a lesser degree because his career was so untimely cut short--had already initiated a departure, a partial departure, from the Victorian tradition of poetry, years before the movement began in England. They had been profoundly influenced by the transcendentalism of Emerson and the New England school of thought. They were more immediately in contact with nature, and they looked upon her with less sophisticated eyes. And in the deep but more or less unconscious optimism of a new country whose vision is fixed upon the future, they had no time for the pessimism and disillusionment of the old world. Therefore there was no violence of reaction. They kept one hand, as it were, on the Victorian tradition while they quietly stepped aside and in advance of it. (298-99)

The Canadian Mercury illustrates a nascent aesthetic that develops as the McGill movement keeps one foot in the camp of Romanticism while, with the other, it attempts to step away.

I

There had already been calls in Canada for a new poetry for a new age. In 1914, a year after Poetry: A Magazine of Verse had published not only poems by "H. D., imagiste," but also "Imagisme" (1913) by F. S. Flint (1885-1960) and Pound's "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste" (1913), Bell and Cockburn of Toronto published Stringer's poems, Open Water. In 1914, Stringer was ranching in Alberta but he had also been a journalist in Montreal and New York and he wrote popular fiction and poetry. Canadian poetry of the first two decades of the twentieth century, he charges in the volume's foreword, is marked by a lack of formal innovation, "meticulously re-echoing what has been said" (10). The result, he argues, is "a technical dexterity which often enough resembles the strained postures of acrobatism" and a kind of poetry whose "hollowness" and aloofness," although often attributed to modern poetry, comes about "because what the singer of today has felt has not been directly and openly expressed" (11).

That Canada was on the verge of sending soldiers to Europe might account for Stringer's choice of a military metaphor through which he extends his argument and calls for a more direct kind of poetry. First, he presents the figure of a belated, Canadian Don Quixote:

> His apparel has remained medieval. He must still don mail to face Mausers, and wear chain-armour against machine-guns. He must scout through shadowy hinterlands in attire that may be historic, yet at the same time is distressingly conspicuous. And when he begins his assault on those favouring moments or inspirational moods which lurk in the deeper valleys and byways of sensibility, he must begin it as a marked man, pathetically resplendent in that rigid steel which is an anachronism and no longer an amour. (10-11)

Although his remarks cannot anticipate the horrors of the First World War about to get under way, they recall Canadian experiences in the Boer War and in police actions in India, and the Dominion Government's campaigns against the Métis when the Gatling gun, a precursor of the machine gun, was first deployed. Against such settings, Stringer's character is a buffoon; he incarnates the prevailing aesthetic of a decaying strain of Romanticism. Stringer's assault on anachronistic and rigid verse echoes the manifesto of Flint and Pound, "Imagisme," with its famous declaration that the rhythm of imagist poetry works in the "sequence of the musical phrase and not in the sequence of a metronome" (199). In his preface, Stringer also argues that Canadian poets should abandon mechanical and self-sufficient measures, and echo, instead, "the rhythm of Nature, whose heart-beats in their manifold expressions are omnipresent but never confined to any single sustained pulse or any one movement" (16-17). His Romantic references to the "heart beat of Nature" and to human spirit, and his description of poets as singers, are, like his own poems, evidence of a strain of late Romanticism.

Nevertheless, Stringer's foreword challenges Canadian poets to experiment with new forms and new language. Whether directly or not, the McGill poets represented in The Canadian Mercury respond. They try to fashion a new aesthetic from a "clean" language. They search, to borrow Stringer's words, for a new "rhythm," and they want to "travel light[ly]" (15), or unburdened by the chain-mail of an outmoded aesthetic.

The Canadian Mercury was founded by Scott and Kennedy as a monthly journal of "Literature and Opinion." Short-lived (the first of its seven issues was published in December 1928; the last in June 1929), it contains poems, short stories, and critical essays. The purpose of the journal, according to its opening editorial, is to give voice to "the spirit which is at last beginning to brood upon our literary chaos." That spirit would spawn a new type of literature, "reflecting, as modern Canadian painting has begun to do, a unique experience of nature and life." To achieve its purpose, The Canadian Mercury also attacked "the state of amiable mediocrity and insipidity in which [Canadian literature] now languishes" (3).

In "Contemporary Poetry" (1926), an essay he had published in the journal's predecessor, The McGill Fortnightly Review, Smith identifies features of this new poetic "spirit," which the McGill poets understood as already emerging in Britain and the United States and which they hoped, through The Canadian Mercury, to establish in Canada. In his essay, Smith argues for a kind of poetry that would displace a derivative of Victorian literature, respond to the rapid technological changes of the early decades of the twentieth century, and acknowledge changing philosophical, religious, and scientific ideas. Borrowing words from Harriet Munroe, editor of Poetry, an American forum for Modernism, Smith calls for direct and concrete perceptions of the world and a poetry of "absolute simplicity and sincerity" (31). The McGill movement's version of Modernism would not eschew conventional form, metre, or rhyme, but their awareness of the work of Yeats and Eliot, and of early Modernism's experiments with free verse and Imagism, generates new forms, irregular rhythm, colloquial diction, and a hard, sparse style.

The McGill poets who contributed to The Canadian Mercury evoke the Canadian natural environment in new and more direct ways than did the Confederation Poets.

More significantly, in terms of the development of a new aesthetic, they create landscapes, and perspectives on human experience that are sharper, both affectively and intellectually, than the verse of their contemporaries that reflects late Romanticism. In "A Rejected Preface," Smith advocates a poetry that will "get rid of the facile words, the stereotyped phrase, and the mechanical rhythm" and "combine colloquialism and rhetoric" (171). The goal is to "to fuse thought and feeling" (172) and replace the oppressive passion and high-minded didacticism of a poetry that "ignores intelligence." Poems in The Canadian Mercury offer a glimpse of the McGill poets in a moment of transition. They represent a response to Stringer's call for a new aesthetic.

II

The Canadian Mercury published poems by Kennedy, Klein, Scott, and Smith, four of the poets who contributed seven years later to New Provinces. However, there are also verses by what Scott calls "minor poets," who continue the "amiable mediocrity" of late Romanticism. Among these poets are Muir, identified in the list of contributors in the third issue as the editor of "Gossip, a Montreal publication" (50), and Hainsworth and Selfridge, "writers of verse" (26). The Canadian Mercury, the colophon of which depicts a chubby Dionysian figure thumbing his nose, represents a moment of transition in Canadian poetry from what its contributors regarded as an outworn aesthetic to experiments with a new kind of poetry. One way by which to understand the features of this modernist strain is to look closely at poems that reflect the aesthetic that the Montreal Modernists want to displace.

The subject of Muir's poems, "Paris to Helen" and "Yesterday," is a fleeting moment of personal experience. Like other verses in The Canadian Mercury (William Crowl's "Et Meure Paris et Helene" and Hainsworth's second sonnet, for example), Muir's poems refer to classical Greece and, like other contributions to the journal (Mona Weiss's "I Have Been Silent," for example, or McNeil's "Agony"), to lost love. "Paris to Helen," as the poem's title announces, concerns two figures from Homeric tradition and describes an attempt by Paris's ghost to communicate with Helen, the woman he abducted, thus causing the Trojan War. In "Yesterday," the imagined landscape of Greece is invoked by the speaker's companion. Both poems are short, lyrical expressions of an undefined sense of loss.

In "Paris to Helen," Helen, an archetypal figure of Beauty, has returned to an empty home, abandoned except for Paris's ghost, who watches her as she walks "among the windy gardens":

> Helen, when you returned that day
> Safe from the perilous seas, the tragic wars,
> And walked among the windy gardens of your home,
> Or passed musingly through long remembered doors,
> Or paused, before a mirror,
> I, a ghost, was at your side,
> But you only said "How prettily the broken shadows
> Glide across the marble floor,"
> And when I tried to speak your name
> You only murmured "Echo's, yes, they were always [sic]
> Here; everything's the same."

Juxtaposing natural objects and human experience, the scene suggests the process through which Muir evokes emotion. A garden, after all, is a human reorganization of nature and this poem's garden is occupied by both a human figure, Helen, and a natural one, the wind. It is set against a background of natural and human elements, "perilous seas" and "tragic wars." From this juxtaposition emerges a sense of grief. Helen wanders in the gardens and through "long remembered doors," unaware of Paris. She does not notice his hovering ghost and, when Paris speaks, she hears only the familiar echoes of her home. The Trojan War in Homer's epics was a catastrophe for everyone involved, but Muir's Helen returns home to find that "everything is the same" as it was before the war. Paris, however, discovers that he has lost the woman he loves and over whom the war was fought; Helen does not even think of him.

References to the Trojan War and to the setting for Helen's return are brief and indistinct. The seas may be "perilous," but whether that state reflects the threats of piracy, naval engagements, or a meteorological turbulence is unspecified. We learn nothing about the contents or arrangements of the windy gardens, and we receive no information about the details or conditions of the doors at which Helen looks nostalgically. The poem's adjectives and verbs, and the figure of Paris's ghost that Helen mistakes for shadows crossing the floor, create only a nebulous sense of an undefined fragility and grief. "Paris to Helen" exemplifies the kind of poetry Scott dismisses in his review of Carman's Wild Garden.

So, too, in some ways, does "Yesterday." Reminiscent of Carman's Sappho (1903), Muir's personification of Greece and her apposition of natural and human elements vaguely evoke, as they do in "Paris to Helen," a sense of loss:

Greece I have not seen
Nor the pale green of her trees,
Nor the tragic stone
Of her immortal dreams.
I have not watched alone
Her pensive stars,
Nor heard the moan
Of her remembering seas. (1-8)

The first stanza explicitly presents the landscape of Greece as something perceived only in the speaker's mind; it is, as she puts it, a "Greece I have not seen." Unlike the "perilous seas," "windy gardens," and shadow-crossed floor of "Paris to Helen," this setting leads not to the fantasy of a meeting of mythical figures but to the speaker's present situation, which is suggested in the second stanza:

yesterday I heard you say
One thing, and look a certain way
Lost in thought, your hands were still,
And I heard a wind above the hill
Sigh and fade and cease,

And yesterday I thought of Greece. (9-14)

Muir's poem presents a moment of a tranquil grief in which the speaker recollects an earlier moment in her own windy garden, but the weak use of the coordinating conjunction in the final line strikes an insincere note.

Juxtaposed with the present setting of the second stanza and the romanticized view of Greece's past in the first is an unspecified word and an undefined pose by someone who, like Helen, is lost in his or her own thoughts (even the gender is not distinguished). This apposition gives rise to a vague grief over an obscure loss. Like the "tragic stone," or the ruins of Greece's "immortal dreams," and like Paris in Helen's musings, the words and gestures of the speaker's companions are only vaguely remembered. The reasons why these words and actions should kindle thoughts of classical Greece are so obscure that we are left speculating on the substance of the poem. The "tragic stone" of the first stanza is all that remains of Greece's "immortal dreams"; perhaps the speaker's own dreams have been reduced to the tragic memories of a broken relationship.

Muir's poems were published after the devastation of the First World War, the popularization of Freud's ideas, the aesthetic experiments of Post-Impressionism and Imagism, and during a period of technological and urban growth in Canada; they were not part of the Aesthetic movement's challenge to Victorian aesthetic values. Muir's juxtaposition of references to nature and to feelings evoked by a momentary experience, continues the pathetic fallacy of late Romanticism, but without Aestheticism's attempt to restore vitality to a Romantic aesthetic. The irony is that, included in a journal that declares itself a vehicle for a new poetry, Muir's verses voice imprecise emotions and reflect a feature of the style of poetry against which the journal, like its colophon, thumbs its nose.

In one interesting respect, however, "Yesterday" signals a desire for a new kind of poetry. Like many of the other poems in The Canadian Mercury, it is not influenced by early Modernism's free verse; it illustrates, however, a move towards a creative engagement with convention. If the Augustan poets had turned to classical figures to reflect a sense of decorum and a desire for social stability, and also to place their work within a respected literary tradition, the Romantics employed these things to express subjective perspectives on individual experience. In its content, "Yesterday" vaguely continues Romanticism's practice, but in its formal qualities Muir turns to the sonnet and plays with it. An octave presents the landscape of Greece, and a sestet the speaker's present situation, which stimulates that imagined landscape. The first two words of the sestet, "But yesterday," constitute the poem's volte, or turn, and establish its temporal context. Consisting of three rhyming couplets, the sestet encloses the scene in the garden with the repetition of the word "yesterday" in its first and last lines. The sestet's regular rhyme is countered by the occasional rhymes of the octet ("trees" and "seas," and "stone," "alone," and "moan"). These sounds heighten the affective content of the landscape with its "tragic stone" and "pensive stars." The first quatrain offers a glimpse of trees and ruins on land, while the second broadens the perspective to include stars and seas. Like the stone reminder of Greece's "immortal dreams," the poem's formal qualities reflect the remnant of a conventional poetic form, but she replaces the iambic pentameter of the English sonnet with shorter lines of two stresses in the first stanza and three in the second. This rhythmic alteration highlights the thematic and temporal differences between the octet and the sestet. Muir's "Yesterday" does not respond to Stringer's call for Canadian experimentation with free verse, but the poem reveals a willingness to break slightly from the Romantic conventions of form, rhyme, and metre.

This willingness is not apparent in two sonnets by N. W. Hainsworth. Like that of Muir's poems, the subject of Hainsworth's first sonnet is a vague sense of loss:

> Oh, long before you uttered your first cry--
> A while before I uttered mine, perhaps--
> A string was broken in my heart, and why
> I cannot say; yet loves grow large and lapse,
> Joys point the brain, and griefs assail the ear,
> The while, within my breast, the imperfect heart
> Revolves its old uneven beat and fear,

Scarce knowing loves are born or loves depart.
        A man, I am, with both his feet in death,
Who trundles him around with hand-spun wheels:
For what the poor heart cannot, that the breath
Of all my being must. And if pain feels
Less dreadful in the soul, and joy more fine,
The fault is Life's or God's, perhaps, not mine?

The apostrophe, "Oh," and the metaphor of a broken string reflect a late Canadian Romanticism languishing aesthetic instead of the new poetry championed by The Canadian Mercury. These elements exude undefined emotion: Hainsworth does not develop the sharp conceits through which sonnets shape their ideas. His octave argues that "loves grow large and lapse," and his sestet applies, vaguely, this generalization to the speaker's own situation. Muir takes a few steps towards experimenting with the sonnet; Hainsworth casually rehearses its formal elements, but he does not, as poets from Petrarch (1304-1374) to Seamus Heaney (b. 1939) have done, use this poetic form to create new perspectives on the nature of human experience or the functions of poetry. His sonnet produces stale diction ("the poor heart" and "the breath / Of all my being"), wooden rhythms, and predictable rhymes ("cry" and "why," "death" and "breath"). Ultimately, like Muir's poems but without their slight innovations, Hainsworth's sonnet expresses a nebulous sense of lost love and a hazy idea that something wrong has resulted from this loss: if "pain feels / Less dreadful [. . .] and joy more fine," then life or God must take the blame.

"Sentimental," another poem by Hainsworth, is more interesting for it seems to align itself with the desire of the editorial board of The Canadian Mercury for a new poetry. An experiment in free verse, its call for a "Maker of Songs" reminds us of both the Anglo-Saxon scop (a bard or "maker"), and the classical Muse who inspired singers and poets:

River flows--toward setting sun the river flows [sic]
Where are the false vaudevillians, O Maker of Songs?

Be inspired, I beg you, to balloon itinerant tenors
With the breath of this evening star--
Deal sadly with lights that glow in darkness
Be but slightly reminded of cabin doors and of mammies;
And let melancholy attend this cold water--
Merely suggest the weariness of Broadway,
O Maker of Songs, and the desire for getting back home.

Many lovers are not embarrassed with manners;
This poet walks not always to dream about money;
And Look! A little child who sings songs
Of childhood days sings songs,
Like the false vaudevillians.

Overtly sentimental imagery ("toward setting sun the river flows" and "a little child who sings songs"), inverted word order ("Be but slightly reminded" and "This poet walks not"), and the melancholy and weariness that concerned the British Aesthetes in the closing decades of the nineteenth century reflect a late strain of Canadian Romanticism.

At the same time, however, irregular stanzas and lines, the rhythmic but incomplete sentence that constitutes the opening line, and, except for the repetition of the word "songs," the absence of rhyme also suggest the influence of free verse. The poem tries to express a new kind of poetry, the desire for which is its subject. The speaker's plea that the Maker of Songs be "but slightly reminded" of stock images of wilderness life or happy African-Americans ("cabin doors" and "mammies") aligns "Sentimental" with the protest by the editors of The Canadian Mercury against the trite poetry of the 1920s.

It also picks up the line of aesthetic development from the eighteenth century that resists the commodification of literature. Poets should not "dream about money." An anxiety about "false vaudevillians" and the request that the Muse minimize "the weariness of Broadway" echo the similar concern of the French Symbolists that poetry should not function as entertainment for the middle-class, and Smith's criticism, in "Wanted--Canadian Criticism," of the poet who becomes "a merchant." "Sentimental," however, does not share Modernism's lament for the loss of the central place of poetry in culture or its celebrations of a Heraclitean flux. Instead, the speaker begs the Maker of Songs to "Deal sadly with lights that glow in darkness" and "let melancholy attend [the] cold water" of the river. In both its opposition to the commercialized entertainment of Vaudeville and its fondness for despondency, Hainsworth's poem, far from being an expression of experimental Modernism, recycles an enervated aesthetic.

Like the poems of Muir and Hainsworth, two by Selfridge nebulously express sentiments associated with a sense of life's mutability and project them onto an indistinct landscape. The subject of "White Silence" is a winter moment marked by a silence and a whiteness that differ from other kinds of silence and whiteness through an undefined tone or tint. The first stanza imagines the "pearly web" of a pale dawn, the murmurs of pigeons, and the hushed voices of labourers who are otherwise not described, while the second offers further emotional images and nebulous references to the winter landscape:

> The whiteness of December's haze, almost opaque,
> Where the torn cloud's edge of copper-gold
> Gleamed through unevenly,
> And the dark branches trailed plain lines
> Down through the soft white curtain's filmy folds. (8-12)

"White Silence" descries beauty in a fleeting moment that slips, like the "silver quiet of an interlude," between a "star-poignant night" and daylight, or between "autumn's flame and winter's snow." In contrast to those that seek a "sharper tang" in Canadian poetry, Selfridge's poem offers a vague sense of the fragility and mutability of life; in the pages of the modernist Canadian Mercury, it exemplifies what Norris refers to as a "transplanted Victorian tradition living out a protracted decadence in Canada" (59).

Selfridge's second poem, "Gulls Inland," engages, like Hainsworth's "Sentimental"--but more vigorously--with elements of early Modernism's free verse. It consists of five, irregular stanzas of short lines. It expresses, however, an undescribed loveliness in a world of birds and water, a loveliness that exists despite feelings of loss and brokenheartedness:

> Now when the west wind
> Carries [the gulls] home
> I shall miss them, miss them.
> They will bear my heart's love to the sea
> And they will tell the sea
> That they know, and I know
> The inland is lovely too
> While there are threads and ribbons
> Of blue water
> Where a bird may dive and rest. (29-38)

The poem suggests an apparent harmony between the speaker and the birds and between the local inland setting and the distant sea; the harmony is mirrored in the repetitions, soft rhymes, and gentle rhythms of mellifluous lines.

In their flirtation with elements of early Modernism's experimental aesthetic, Selfridge's "Gulls Inland," Hainsworth's "Sentimental," and Muir's "Yesterday" seem to share the desire exemplified in The Canadian Mercury for a poetry that breaks free from the fixed forms and prosody of the prevailing poetry of the 1920s. Their subject matter, however, their preoccupation with undefined feelings projected onto vague landscapes, and their unquestioning recycling of poetic convention indicate that these poems are not yet broken the hold of late Canadian Romanticism. Although published in the progressively minded Canadian Mercury, they represent a dead aesthetic the journal wants to bury in order to make room another kind of poetry.

III

In his article in The Canadian Mercury, "The Future of Canadian Literature," Kennedy announces that Queen Victoria was "tucked away long ago" (100). In 1929, however, a late version of the aesthetic exemplified by the Confederation Poets had not yet been put to rest; it becomes the subject of attack in Kennedy's essay. "The Victorian tradition," he declares, "was transplanted here in the flower of its youth and has by now outgrown its usefulness" (100). As Dudek and Gnarowski describe them in The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada, Kennedy, Smith, and Scott come to be recognized as initiators of Canadian Modernism (24); their poems in The Canadian Mercury in 1928 and 1929 suggest that, if what Kennedy refers to as the "Victorian tradition" had outlived its usefulness, it had not yet entirely lost its hold. What would emerge in the following decades as the Modernism of Kennedy, the mixture of personal lyrical and social comment in the poetry of Scott, and the impersonal and metaphysical Modernism of Smith, begins in a struggle for, in the words of the opening editorial, "the emancipation of Canadian literature from the state of amiable mediocrity and insipidity in which it languishes" (3). The poems of Smith, Kennedy, and Scott in The Canadian Mercury formulate a response to Stringer's call, in his preface, for a "formal emancipation" of Canadian poetry (10). They also reflect, as do those of Muir, Hainsworth, and Selfridge, elements of the aesthetic the McGill poets sought to displace.

Smith's "The Circle" (1929) is included in the April-May 1929 issue of The Canadian Mercury; with slight revisions, it would be reprinted several times and included in Poems New and Collected (1967). "Proud Parable" (1926) first appeared in McGill Fortnightly Review. It is revised in 1932 as "Like an Old Proud King in a Parable," the poem with which Smith begins his Collected Poems (1962), The Classic Shade (1978), and Poems New and Collected. "Good Friday" (1929) would also be revised, reprinted several times, and included in Poems New Collected. Smith's poems in The Canadian Mercury exemplify an austere, symbolist modernist aesthetic.

The six, cross-rhymed quatrains of iambic tetrameter of "The Circle" reflect the traditional form of the ballad and develop a conventional poetic theme, the cycle of natural seasons:

> Over me the summer drips,
> Over me the wind cries;
> A tree above me sways and dips,

A bird above me sings and flies.

Insensibly the season slips
From coloured days to paler days,
With faded berries on my lips,
And in my eyes an autumn haze. (1-8)

The poem steps aside from Muir's landscape of clichéd "perilous seas," undefined "windy gardens" and "hill," but is not very much better with its own "faded berries," "crocuses among the grass" (7, 20), and other specific objects that Smith sets in motion with appropriate verbs: a tree "sways and dips" and there is "drifting snow" (3, 10). Smith's seasons are neither meteorological nor biological phenomena but aesthetic experiences. They are sensuous "spots of time": "now the oozing summer drips," in the final stanza for example, and "heavy days of slow delight" (21-22). The haze of autumn in the second stanza becomes, in the third, an erotic "winter mist / Of amethyst and drifting snow" that "dances solemnly and slow[ly]" (9-12).

Smith's descriptive and evocative language operates with the mellifluous rhythms and rhymes of a ballad. In these stanzas, he creates a sequence of images that reveal the circle that is the poem's subject. "The Circle" opens with a glimpse of summer to which it returns, in the closing stanza, after moving through autumn, winter, and spring. The last stanza repeats the lines and images of the first, with a few changes. Summer "drips" again, but now it also oozes. The wind's cries at the beginning the poem are replaced with "heavy days of slow delight," and the bird, which sang and flew, returns, "poised for flight" (21-24). Smith's circle of seasons is like a wheel in motion, or Heraclitus's river of flux; life is simultaneously continuous and changing. A tree and a bird in the first summer stanza become more specific when Smith substitutes, in the final stanza, definite articles for the early indefinite ones. In the poem's revised version, the only change Smith makes is to use definite articles in both stanzas, but the difference between the first and last stanzas in The Canadian Mercury version suggests that, through the changing cycle of seasons, the speaker finds a closer familiarity with nature.

The poem's structure emphasizes the continuously changing nature of Smith's circle of seasons. Autumn and spring are transition moments; the single stanzas accorded them bridge the opening and closing stanzas of summer, and the two in the middle describe winter. The first of these middle stanzas describes a wintry setting; the second meditates on the speaker's emotional state. Like the silenced brook and waterfall, he "cannot call," and his breath is only a ghostly substance, a bare hint of existence (13-14). If the "quietude" the speaker "share[s] / With earth and sky" (15-16) is the circle's nadir, then the bird perched aloft at the end of the poem, "poised for flight" (24) is its zenith. The tension between rest and motion, to which the word "poised" alludes, suggests that the speaker himself anticipates the approach of another autumn and a transition back to winter. Images of continuity and change in nature bring together an idea and a related feeling; the circle becomes a symbol fusing the concept of mutability with experiences of delight and solitude, and of a feeling of unity with a natural environment.

Smith's "The Circle," like Muir's "Yesterday" and Selfridge's "Gulls Inland," continues the Romantic tradition in which the natural world reflects the speaker's experience. In contrast to the grief expressed by Muir and Selfridge, however, Smith celebrates, rather than bemoans, the experience of change. "The Circle" is in the Victorian tradition of Roberts's contemplative poem, "The Mowing" (1890), in which the sun seals the "spirit of June" into the hay which will, in winter, "cheer the herds with pasture memories" (Collected Poems; 10-14), and of Lampman's sensuous pleasure in "Heat" (1888):

> I think some blessèd power
> Hath brought me wandering idly here:
> In the full flower of this hour
> My thoughts grow keen and clear. (Lyrics of Earth; 45-48)

The fusion of idea and affect in "The Circle" reveals Smith's interest in symbolist poetry, especially that of Yeats, whose poetry was the subject of Smith's M. A. dissertation. In "Symbolism in Poetry" (1925), an essay published in The McGill Fortnightly Review, Smith argues that the use of symbolism, although not a "new thing" but a practice reflected in Greek mysteries, Biblical poets, Christian images, mediaeval architecture, Dante, and Blake (12), is an important, deliberate feature of modern poetry. Quoting from Yeats, he summarizes the function of the symbol. It is

> a casting out of descriptions of nature for the sake of nature, of the moral law for the sake of the moral law, a casting out of all anecdotes and that brooding over scientific opinion that so often extinguished the central flame in Tennyson and that vehemence that would make us do or not do certain things. (16)

Symbols express the poet's "intense subjectivity" and "inner solitude"; they are aesthetic perspectives on the human experience of being in relationship with a broader reality. Symbolism, suggests Smith, "is somewhat like prayer being a communion of the microcosm with the macrocosm" (12). The use of symbols is therefore "an attempt to express the inexpressible." In "Symbolism in Poetry,"Smith also quotes Blake's words about holding "infinity in the palm of your hand"; unlike McNeil's "Remembering Ishtar," Smith's "Circle" does not mimic Blake but, in its own way, does what Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" did. It points us to a beauty, to an aesthetic truth that may be glimpsed in a poem, but which cannot be reduced to words or images. Djwa argues that symbols give Canadian poets a language with which to evoke Canadian landscape ("A New Soil" 15). Smith's symbolism is a means of aestheticising Canadian experience and generating a new vision of its beauty. "The Circle" invokes the cycle of seasons to signify a joyful experience of life's mutability; "Proud Parable" uses symbolic language to signify the kind of poetry that emerges in the Modernism of the McGill poets.

Although the king in the poem is bitter and leaves both a "fawning courtier" and a "doting Queen" (l. 2) it is not, as in the later, revised version of this poem, to make "a meadow in the northern stone" and create a new palace (l. 5). Nor does the speaker of "Proud Parable" address the king as "Father" or frame his desire for a cold, or austere, pride within the sexual metaphor of a "naked bridegroom by his bride" that we find in the later version. Yeats's poem, "He Remembers Beauty" (1899) in W. B. Yeats: Selected Poetry (1990), imagines kings who hurl their crowns into "shadowy pools" (5);

Smith's bitter king, who abandons his crown, resembles them. In the revised version of Smith's poem, this monarch becomes a figure of solitude, purity, and happiness. He resembles Yeats's bard who, in "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" (1889), gladly "sings of earth's dreamy youth" (54). A dreamed-up, or "breathed," palace of inviolate air that replaces the former royal life echoes the shepherd's assertion that, "Of all the many changing things" of life and history, "Words alone are certain good" (7, 10). Smith's king does not go to Byzantium, but the aestheticism of a heart caged within the new palace symbolizes "the artifice of eternity" of Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" (1927):

> Once out of nature I shall never take
> My bodily form from any natural thing,
> But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
> Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
> To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
> Or set upon a golden bough to sing
> To lords and ladies of Byzantium
> Of what is past, or passing, or to come. (25-32)

In "Proud Parable," Smith's king is a different kind of figure from the monarch we encounter in the poem's later version. He resembles the subject of Yeats's "The Sad Shepherd" (1889) who travels alone in a harsh, or at least unsympathetic, landscape. He also resembles Shakespeare's Lear who wanders in a desolate heath, half-dead and half-mad; caught, like Lear, in "the pelting of [a] pitiless storm" (King Lear 3.4.29), Smith's king begins to apprehend the truth of his situation:

> [He] took a staff and started out alone
> and wandered on for many a night and day,
> And came, at last, half dead, half mad with pain,
> Into a solitude of wind and rain,
> And slept alone there, so old writers say,
> With only his Pride for a counterpane. (ll. 4-9)

Like Edgar who wants to keep Lear company in the storm, Smith's speaker wants to follow the king into the cold and desolate landscape; the poem is an expression of a hard, impersonal aesthetic with which Smith wants to replace the "hollow sceptre and gilt crown," or the vacuous and ornamental poetry of a strain of Canadian Romanticism.

Traces of this Romanticism in "Proud Parable" are removed in the revised version. The vague and tired line, "And wandered on for many a night" (5), is replaced, in "Like an Old Proud King in a Parable," with a less affective line and a sharper image: "He made a meadow in the northern stone." This obviates the need for an additional syllable ("many a night") which, like the artificial rhythms Scott criticises in Carman's poetry, defeats any effort to dissociate the poem's aesthetic from that of its precursors. A vague abstraction in the poem's early version, "a lying of Pride with Pride" (l. 15), is also revised and changed into the metaphor of a bridegroom with his bride. This metaphor, and that of the caged swan, minimize the poem's attention to the natural environment. They reflect Smith's desire not to describe nature "for the sake of nature," but to create a poetry of "perfect objectivity and impersonality," which, as he writes in "A Rejected Preface," re-creates an object "as precisely and vividly and simply as possible" (172).

These qualities are already reflected in the earlier version of Smith's poem, but "Proud Parable" foregrounds the landscape; it does not imagine the artifice of a new palace or the metaphor of a honeymoon suite. Smith's description, his "rain-wet stone," the "solitude of wind and rain," and "winds that make the raw face smart" are not coloured with the moody grey of Yeats's poetry. Nor do they create a screen on which to project, as Selfridge does in "Gulls Inland," a feeling for the sake of expressing that feeling. Rather, the emotions of bitterness and anger evoked by these descriptions of solitude and simplicity become expressions of an affect fused with an idea; it is a symbolist poem meditating on its own nature and on the new aesthetic of Modernism.

"Like an Old King in a Proud Parable," writes Ferns in his discussion of what he calls Smith's "signature poem," appears to define a situation faced by Canadian poets in the 1920s. "At the same time," he adds, Smith "seeks to thin Canadian nature poetry down to a new purity and toughness, avoiding descriptive excess" (31). This change is already evident in "Proud Parable," the aesthetic core of "Like an Old King in a Proud

Parable." The early version of Smith's poem rejects the soft and decorative language of late Romanticism in which the landscape constitutes an ideal image of the environment or human nature or projects an a priori ethical idea. It begins to breathe into existence the stone-hard and imperturbable aesthetic of high Modernism symbolized in a strength which "nerved the Spartan spearman." The clause in the closing stanza of the last version of "The Lonely Land" is a logical development:

> This is the beauty
> of strength
> broken by strength
> and still strong. (ll. 35-38)

The proud Spartan warrior is more modern than Muir's Paris, and does not place Smith among those poets Stringer attacks with his image of the archaic knight. The value of the austere aesthetic of "Proud Parable" will be more sharply expressed in the meadow, or new poetry, which the king in the poem's revised version makes "in the northern stone."

Smith's third poem, "Good Friday," will, like "Proud Parable," be revised later; unlike "Proud Parable," the Canadian Mercury version of "Good Friday" is simpler and harsher than its revision. The poem is in two parts. The first two stanzas describe Christ's crucifixion, while the next three meditate on the fear it evokes in those who witness the event and, by implication, in those who think about it now. There is also pity and compassion ("His face was a faded flower / Drooping and lost" [l. 7-8]), but the question of fear focusses the stanzas on the meaning of Christ's death. As Compton points out, Smith's poem seems to be modelled on Donne's "Good Friday, 1613" (1633-69); both poems imagine the effect of the scene on those who witness it (A. J. M. Smith 126-27). Whereas Donne's poem expresses the idea of the speaker's sinfulness, Smith's poem, with its emphasis on fear, achieves another effect.

The two poems create various images that highlight the nature of Smith's aesthetic. Donne establishes an elaborate metaphysical conceit. His poem is subtitled "Riding Westward"; Donne creates a chiaroscuro that links the setting of the sun into which the speaker rides with Christ's death behind him in the east, the direction of the sun's daily resurrection. This contrast parallels the speaker's action in turning his back on Christ, or sin, with his desire for forgiveness: "That Thou mayst know me," he begs, "I'll turn my face" (42). The poem is a prayer that Christ's restored image and resurrected grace will purify the speaker of his "deformity." Donne's complex imagery welds together an idea and sentiment; it juxtaposes the concept of a terrible and powerful grace with the emotions of shame, grief, hope, and joy. Donne's "Good Friday" is a poem of Christian devotion.

Smith's poem is simpler and moves towards an end which, although expressed in religious language, is not an expression of devotion but of terror. Religious idiom, like sexual metaphors, is a way of generating a vision of aesthetic truth or beauty. Dressed in religious language, Smith's "Good Friday" expresses the aesthetic vision of "The Circle" and "Proud Parable." Evocations of nature in those two poems are reduced, in "Good Friday," to the kind of generalization reflected in Muir's landscape, but without her affective descriptions. Bare references to sea, wind, earth, and sky create a sparse background against which Christ is crucified. They evoke neither a particular landscape nor specific emotions, but refer, instead, to two events against which the terror of the crucifixion is made clear. Smith's allusions to these events offer a glimpse into his modernist aesthetic.

In the New Testament, the narrative of Mark's Gospel paints a scene in which, caught with his disciples on the Sea of Galilee, Christ stills a storm: "And the wind ceased, and there was great calm" (Mark 4:39). Against this background, the first stanza of Smith's poem raises the idea of choice:

> This day upon the bitter tree
> Died One who had he willed
> Could have dried up the wide sea
> And the wind stilled. (l. 1-4)

According to Mark's account, after calming the storm, Jesus asks his companions why they are "so fearful." His question, however, does not calm them; instead, they fear "exceedingly" (Mark 4:40-41). Fear is also the response of those who witness the death of one who does not seem, this time, to want to still "the tumult / Of the fading sky" (17-18). "Who then," asks the speaker, "was not afraid?" (9).

Smith's fourth stanza alludes to a second event that raises the question of Christ's will. Mark's Gospel was written after the destruction of Jerusalem; its presentation of an encounter between Jesus and the religious and political authorities of his day turns a historical memory into a prediction of the Temple's destruction. Resisting his disciples' admiration for Herod's Temple that was not a "palace of inviolate air," but which was, nevertheless, an impressive architectural work, Christ tells them that "there shall not be left one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down" (Mark 13:2). The interpretation of these words as a claim that Christ himself had the power to destroy the Temple is the basis of charges leading to his execution (15:58). With those words, however, he begins an apocalyptic discourse about "wars and the rumours of wars" (13:7), and a catastrophe of cosmological proportions: "the stars that are in heaven shall fall and the powers that are in heaven shall be shaken" (13:25). It is to this catastrophe, which will follow the Temple's destruction, that Smith's poem refers. "Who then was not afraid," asks the speaker,

> Of him who with a cry
> Could shatter if he willed
> The sea and earth and sky
> And them re-build [?] (9, 13-16)

Donne's poem emphasises the speaker's sense of sinfulness and his grateful devotion, but Smith's allusions to events in the Gospel narratives highlight something else. Theologically, Smith's "Good Friday" reflects the Christ who, in an early hymn, abdicates his divine power and becomes "obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:8). Aesthetically, however, Smith's figure is like the bitter king of "Proud Parable" who renounces the trappings of a dominant, but hollow, aesthetic and willingly descends into "a solitude of wind and rain" (l. 7). "Good Friday" uses a conventional religious theme; it demonstrates, however, not popular Victorian images of a compassionate healer or magisterial teacher, but the hard poetry of "Proud Parable." Its fusion of fear and the thoughts of death transform the witnesses' reactions to the crucifixion into a symbol of a modernist aesthetic aptly expressed by Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) in the first of his "Duino Elegies" (1923):

> [. . .] For beauty's nothing
> but the beginning of terror, which we are just able to endure,
> and we are so awed because it serenely disdains
> to annihilate. Every angel is terrifying. (4-7)

In his essay, "The Yeatsian Presence in A. J. M. Smith's 'Like an Old Proud King in a Parable'" (1979), Ian MacLaren argues that the final version of Smith's poem describes a poet who, "deluded by the trappings of poetical convention being imposed upon him," gets rid of "the gilt crown, the hollow sceptre, the doting but ultimately tyrannical queen," or, in other words, "oppressively emotional poetry" (62). In "Good Friday," a similar point is made as the crucified figure divests himself of a divine crown and miraculous power. The effusive poetry of a decayed version of Romanticism is to be replaced, in the agenda of The Canadian Mercury, with a harder kind of poetry. "Sensibility is no longer enough," Smith himself argues in "Wanted--Canadian Criticism"; "intelligence is also required. Even in Canada" (601). Emotions and ideas must be fused even in poems by Canadians that, like "Proud Parable" and "Good Friday," do not describe a Canadian landscape. Smith's poems generate their own aesthetic truth or beauty as an alternative to seconding truths claimed by theological, ethical, or scientific reasoning. Juxtaposing ideas and emotions, Smith expresses a fear kindled by an awareness that Christ refused to exercise his miraculous power. Like the king in "Proud Parable" who escapes the trappings of convention, and like nature's self-divestment of permanence in "The Circle," "Good Friday" illustrates both an aesthetic shift away from the affective qualities of a decayed strain of Romanticism and a process of creating an austere, aesthetic perspective on reality.

Kennedy's poem "Sequel" is later revised slightly and included in New Provinces as "Epithalamium." Like Smith's "Good Friday," it seems to be modelled on one of Donne's poems, in this case "The Dissolution" (1633-69). Both poems are meditations on the death of a woman, the speaker's beloved in Donne's and the speaker's mother in Kennedy's. In neither poem does death occasion terror. Rather, it is an event that kindles a celebration of a former love and its sexual and other dimensions; both poems acknowledge the separation death has effected between the speaker and his beloved. "Those things whereof I consist," says Donne's speaker, "hereby / In me abundant grow, and burdenous, / And nourish not, but smother" (6-8). Kennedy's speaker reflects on the love his parents had had for each other:

> This is the body of my mother, pierced by me
> In grim fulfilment of our destiny,
> Now dry and quiet as her barren womb,
> Is laid beside the shell of that bridegroom
> My father, who with eyes towards the wall
> Sleeps evenly; his dust stirs not at all,
> No syllable of greeting curls his lips
> As to his impotent side his leman slips.
> Lo! These are two of unabated worth
> Who in the shallow bridal bed of earth
> Find youth's fecundity, and of their swift
> Comminglement of bone and sinew lift--
> A lover's seasonable gift to blood
> Made bitter by a parchèd widowhood--
> This bloom of tansy from the sullen ground:
> My sister, heralded by no moan, no sound.

A second model for Kennedy's poem is Smith's "Prothalamium" (1928), first published in The Dial and reprinted, in four stanzas instead of two, in Poems New and Collected (136). Francis Zichy, in "Leo Kennedy" (1990), points out that a typescript of "Sequel" in the A. M. Klein Papers of the National Archives is subtitled "for A. J. M. S." (112 n19). This dedication reflects a debt to Smith that is also reflected in the structure of Kennedy's poem and in the title he gives its revision. Although consisting of one stanza, "Sequel" has, like the Dial version of Smith's poem, two major parts. The first stanza of Smith's poem identifies the occasion for the speaker's grief (the death of his sister), and the second reflects on the meaning that death has for the speaker. Kennedy's poem is a sixteen-line variation of the sonnet in which its octave presents the occasion for the speaker's thoughts (the death of his mother), and a sestet that meditates on its significance. A summarizing coda consists of a couplet that links a flower by the grave with the speaker; it is his "sister." The title of Kennedy's revised version of this poem, like the title of Smith's poem, is a formal term derived from the Greek "thalamium," meaning bridal chamber. In Kennedy's poem, the bridal chamber is a grave; in Smith's, it is a grave-like room where the corpse and the speaker await the funeral. Smith's "Prothalamium" celebrates a coming marriage, brokered by death, between the speaker and the woman to whom he refers, literally or metaphorically, as his sister: "My sister, whom my dust shall marry" (l. 5). Kennedy's "Sequel," or "Epithalamium," is a marriage song describing the reunion of the speaker's dead mother with his father, whose "dust stirs not at all." These overt signs of Kennedy's literary debt to Smith help us understand, as Zichy puts it, "the influence of Smith and the metaphysical mode" (88).

Kennedy's poem is more formal and inflexible than either of its models. "She's dead," Donne says bluntly and plainly in the opening line of his poem (1). Beginning with a demonstrative adverb and a prepositional phrase that, together, delay the verb and its subject and generate a heightened poetic language, Smith's opening line is softer than Donne's: "Here in this narrow room there is no light" (1). In Donne's poem, the stark reality of his beloved's death provokes a meditation on what holds them together. Smith's approach is not gentler, but it is more circuitous. The grim conditions of the room where he waits lead the speaker back to the reason for his being there. In the second line, a dead tree scrapes, or "sings," and hints at something that is not disclosed until the fifth line when we learn that the poem concerns the death of the speaker's sister. Kennedy, like Donne, acknowledges the woman's death in the first words of the opening line of his poem, but the use of the demonstrative pronoun, "this," distances the speaker from his mother while the description of their relationship, with its harsh metaphor for birth, "pierced," and a vague expression that his birth was the "fulfilment" of an undefined "destiny," give the poem an impersonal tone.

The language of their poems reflects Smith's development of a modernist aesthetic and Kennedy's recycling of a form of Romanticism. Smith's poem is formal: his sister sleeps, "yet knows what bitter root it is / That stirs within her." As well, their union in death is a "holy sacrament" that is "solemnized" in older literature (6). Nevertheless, there is no archaic literary diction, and the lines' rhythms are not sustained artificially with unnecessary syllables; this poem has displaced late Canadian Romanticism. At times, the language is as blunt and matter-of-fact as Donne's, and reflects the cadences and expressions of daily speech in the twentieth century. The bitter root that stirs in the dead woman's body "splits the heart." In addition to a tolling bell, another invocation of Donne, and the tree that moves against the window, the dark and narrow room includes a "Ceiling dripping and the plaster falling" (19-22). Unlike that of Smith's "Prothalamium," the language of Kennedy's poem includes vague or unexplained phrases. Why, for example, is the destiny which the speaker shares with his mother by virtue of his birth a "grim" one? How has the womb of the speaker's mother become barren? Is Kennedy merely protesting the fact of death and the separation it creates? Why is the sexual union of the speaker's parents "a seasonable gift"? In addition to these sources of vagueness, Kennedy employs archaic diction. The interjection, "lo," which begins the sestet but which is replaced, in the revised version, with the conjunction "yet," and the Middle English word, "leman," with which the speaker describes the woman's relationship to her husband, add nothing to the idea or emotions in this poem and indeed detract from them. So do such elevated poetic expressions as "parchèd," with its accented second syllable, or the phrase, worthy of the British Aesthetes or Muir's Romanticism, "heralded by no moan."

Instead of the archaic diction Kennedy employs, Smith makes explicit reference to literary precursors to his poem and representations of an older poetry he leaves behind. A play by John Webster (c.1758-c.1632), The Duchess of Malfi (1623), Shakespeare's Hamlet (1601) ("the Danish battlements"), and Donne himself ("that preacher from a cloud in Paul's") allude to a long-standing tradition of death as a union, or marriage (14-15). The poetry represented by these allusions, although "harsh," belongs to an era from "a good while ago" (13). Although continuing with a traditional theme, "Prothalamium" does not pick up Webster's sense of horrifying tragedy or the sense of "a divinity that shapes our ends" (Hamlet 5.2.10); moreover, it does not share Donne's vision of the moment of unity ("My body then doth hers involve" [5]), which is death's gift. Rather, the austere setting and formal language of Smith's poem create an intense expression of personal grief.

If the metaphysical poetry of Donne and Smith influences "Sequel," there are other influences at work in Kennedy's "Singing Girl," a lament for the death of another woman--in this case, a singer.

> She has put away
> Her singing and her laughter,
> All the fierce pride
> Of her golden throat;
> She has laid aside
> Beneath a granite rafter
> The echo of her vanished note. (1-7)

The poem consists of three stanzas, two of seven lines each and, set between them, one of eight lines. Brief irregular lines and end rhymes echo the liberation that free verse offers. There are surprising juxtapositions of sounds. The woman's "laughter" is rhymed with the "granite rafter" of her tomb and, in that tomb, the last sound from her "golden throat" is echoed in the last words of the stanza, "her vanished note." There are, however, predictable rhymes of the kind that can be found in almost any poem reflecting an enervated expression of Romanticism. The reader is urged to "bid the rain" to fall because the singer "will not again" be present to "Attend the skirling plover" (18, 20-21). In the middle stanza, whether the plover or another species, "No bird sings" (4). The line is taken from Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci" (1818):

O what can ail thee, knight at arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge has wither'd from the lake,
And no birds sing. (1-4)

Like Keats's knight, Kennedy's speaker grieves the loss of an enchanted figure; like the speaker in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819), for whom the bird's "plaintive anthem fades / Past the near meadows" and is "buried deep / In the next valley-glades" (75-78), he too hears the song, or the echo of the singer's last note, vanish (7). As Keats's ode concludes, its speaker is uncertain about the music he has heard. "Was it a vision, or a waking dream?" he asks; "Fled is that music: Do I wake or sleep?" (79-80). Kennedy's poem echoes Keats's Romanticism, but without its vitality. There is in "Singing Girl" none of Keats's uncertainty about beauty, or the aesthetic truth that poetry generates. "Singing Girl" reflects the aesthetic that Kennedy attacks in "The Future of Canadian Literature"; its restrained and almost impersonal closing lines ("She will not again / Attend the skirling plover, / And she will have abjured the rest" [20-22]), do not mitigate the outpouring of affective adjectives in the first stanza ("the fierce pride / Of her golden throat," for example), or the outpouring of emotion in the wet, grey landscape of the second:

Let the buds wither
And the grey rain wander
Down a dim place, where
No bird sings;
These cannot hurt her
Any longer;
She has closed her
Heart to these things.
Of endless music over
Stone, and bid the rain
Wail against her breast. (8-15)

The creative uncertainty and self-consciousness of Keats's poems have, indeed, vanished from Kennedy's. They are not replaced, however, with the hard, direct poetry of Smith's Modernism but with a vague sense of grief over the loss of an older aesthetic that the singer embodies.

Kennedy's poems, "Sequel" and "Singing Girl," like the poems of Muir, Hainsworth, and Selfridge, reveal the influence of elements of a late strain of Romanticism, even in a journal intended to establish a modernist aesthetic in Canada; Scott's four poems in The Canadian Mercury, "March Field" (1929), "Spring Flame" (1929), "Vagrant" (1928), and "Old Song" (1929), poems that are included in The Collected Poems of F. R. Scott (1981), illustrate elements of that aesthetic.

"March Field" presents, in an imagist manner, a hard and clear aesthetic vision of a moment of transition between winter and spring:

> Now the old folded snow
> Shrinks from black earth.
> Now is thrust forth
> Heavy and still
> The field's dark furrow.
>
> Not yet the flowing
> The mound-stirring
> Not yet the inevitable flow.
>
> There is a warm wind, stealing
> From blunt brown hills, loosening
> Sod and cold loam
> Round rigid root and stem.
>
> Yet no seed stirs
> In this bare room

Under the hollow sky.

The focus of the poem is a narrow one, spatially and temporally. It concentrates, not on the all-encompassing "earth and sky, with brook and fall" of Smith's cycle of seasons ("The Circle," l. 16), but on part of a ploughed field that is becoming exposed as the winter's snow cover starts to melt. The description is economical; the snow is "old" and "faded," the stubble "round" and "rigid." The minimalist approach of Imagism and Impressionism creates, in this poem, a crisp image that is neither blurred nor softened by the explicit ascriptions of affect to natural objects that we find in expressions of Romanticism.

Formally, "March Field," reflects the influence of Modernism's experiments with free verse in which the rhythms of natural speech and the play of stressed and unstressed syllables, rather than established conventions, shape the length of a poem's lines, its metre, and its rhyme patterns. In this poem, two stanzas that contain lines with two stressed syllables ("Round rigid root and stem," for example) alternate with two, three-lined stanzas, the lines of which contain one predominantly stressed syllable ("Yet no seed stirs"). Such short, rhythmic lines leave no room for ornamental description or didactic comment; they direct our attention immediately to the primary image of the field. The sound patterns in this brief lyric intensify the image. The half-rhymes of "loam," "stem," and "room" audibly heighten the visual portrait of the soil as a sparse chamber where the seed awaits spring germination. Quickly and deftly, Scott's poem reproduces the movement in traditional topographical poems, directing our eyes downwards from one object to another. In the first stanza, this shift from the snow in the first line to the emerging furrow in the last is underscored by the rhyming nouns.

Instead of late Canadian Romanticism's expression of unidentified emotion by ascribing affect the setting, "March Field" illustrates Imagism's evocation of specific ideas and emotions through its direct treatment of an object. Objectively, the poem points to a moment between the final disappearance of traces of winter and the growth of a field of grain, such as winter wheat or rye, that had been seeded before winter. The rhythms and sounds of the poem's short lines direct us to this moment. Like the seed planted in the "cold loam," however, specific feelings are generated by the word order in these lines and by verbs of motion. The sentences that form the first two and the last stanzas begin with conjunctions ("now," "yet" and "not yet"). The effect is solemn. The contrast between "now" and "not yet" juxtaposes lingering snow with an anticipation of flowing, melted water. It is a tension that is also created by contrasting actions. The black earth is "thrust forth" as the old snow "shrinks" and a warm wind is "loosening" the soil around "rigid root and stem." These contrasts underscore another: in a landscape filled with motion, the "dark furrow" is "still" and "no seed stirs." Smith's changing seasons in "The Circle" express delight in life's mutability, and the flower that sprouts from the grave in Kennedy's "Sequel" embodies grief and the sense of separation occasioned by the death of a loved one. Scott's image does not kindle an awareness of the transitoriness of life; it generates an unresolved tension. In its emotion, and in the prosody which generates it, "March Field" embodies a moment of transition between two distinct aesthetics. It represents a Canadian Modernism that, in The Canadian Mercury, emerges from a exhausted version of Romantic aesthetics like the furrow that emerges, in this poem, from old snow.

The rhyming couplets that constitute the eight stanzas of "Vagrant" reflect one of the oldest forms of stanza structures in English poetry but, like Pound's famous imagist couplet, "In a Station of the Metro" (1916), they are also vehicles for a modernist aesthetic. Sometimes formed of sentence fragments and punctuated by spaces, the stanzas disclose a mental process similar to the "stream-of-consciousness" of modernist novels:

> the compass of his mind   astute
> to find a polar absolute
> patrolled a mute circumference
> the present seemed the only tense. (5-8)

Scott's poem generates truth from fragments of experience and ideas. Spatial punctuation and the absence of capitalization are typographical elements that, literally, help to shape "Vagrant" and that reflect twentieth-century poetic experiments. The first words in each line are not capitalized; the lines are not distinct units of thought but moments in the idea formulated in the sentences of which they are a part, or the fragments they contain. An isolated letter "i" is in lower case, highlighting the image of the stanza in which it occurs in a way that almost anticipates the techniques of twentieth-century concrete poetry: "the last dot in the sky / did but accentuate an i." The diction is formal rather than colloquial, but it is contemporary and not archaic: the subject of the poem is a vagrant who "fled beyond the outer star" and beyond "the final vestiges of form" and who is "content to live in montreal" [sic].

Scott's subject is an urban wanderer. He is not, for example, like the vagrant in Carman's poems, "The Vagabonds" (1895), at home in rollicking rhythms and expressions of the beauty of nature's sounds and colours:

> There is something in the autumn that is native to my blood--
> Touch of manner, hint of mood;
> And my heart is like a rhyme,
> With the yellow and the purple and the crimson keeping time. (1-4)

Scott's vagrant "found he was alone" and "content" in an urban landscape. His wanderlust is "incomplete," but unlike another urban figure, Eliot's Prufrock, he is not disaffected by his surroundings. That environment is more than Montreal, however; his mind flees into space "beyond the outer star"; in the discovery of his solitude, he makes the infinity of the universe his own. If he does not yearn for Carman's outdoor life of vagabondia, it is not because he is alienated from the physical elements of his urban world. Instead, he struggles against prevailing social conventions, escaping mentally "to spaces where no systems are" and "beyond the last accepted norm / the final vestiges of form" (2-4). Neither a traditional respect for the past nor a shrewd regard for the future concern him: "the present seemed the only tense." The figure of an urban vagrant and his struggle with the "accepted norm" point to Scott's social commentary with which much of his subsequent poetry will be concerned; its formal arrangements provide an illustration of poetic elements of the modernist poetry championed by the journal in which "Vagrant" is published.

In contrast to "March Field" and "Vagrant," Scott's "Spring Flame" reflects established poetic conventions instead of modernist innovations as it tries to create a sense of mystery about the transition to a new season:

> Through the glowing dark
> She came
> Like to an arrow-head
> Of flame.
>
> One of no fear
> By a wood
> Spake to the old fire
> In her blood.
>
> And the brimming trees
> Knew the bond
> Between them and those two
> On the ground.

The stanzas of "Spring Flame," like those of "March Field," consist of alternating two- and one-stress lines. Their structure echoes that of the traditional ballad; each stanza is a quatrain in which the second and fourth lines rhyme. The association of a female figure with an element of nature, and of spring's arrival with the arousal of "old fire" in the "blood" are also long-standing poetic traditions. The diction is occasionally antiquated. The woman arrives "like to" (rather than "like") a burning arrowhead in the dark, and a second figure "spake" (rather than "spoke") to her. The trees in the final stanza are sentient beings: they "[know] the bond" that exists between them as elements of the natural landscape and two figures "on the ground." The woman, and another person who is described only as "One of no fear / By a wood," and the relationship they have with their environment, are undefined. This lack of definition, together with vague allusions to traditional poetic images and the arrival of spring, create the poem's sense of mystery.

They also give rise to the nebulousness of a Romantic aesthetic exemplified in the poems of the lesser known contributors to The Canadian Mercury.

If the central image in "Spring Flame" echoes poetic traditions, "Old Song" creates an older tradition with which to nourish a new kind of poetry. Simple diction and short lines of crossed-rhymes and half-rhymes ("leaves" and "gives," "aeons" and "sound"), together with the absence of capitalization and punctuation, reflect the formal elements of "March Field" and "Vagrant." These structural and typographical features underscore the austere imagery and contribute to a direct treatment of the landscape and its "elemental song":

> far voices
> and fretting leaves
> this music the hillside gives
>
> but in the silent flowing river
> an elemental song
> for ever
>
> a deep calling
> of no mind
> out of long aeons
> when dust was blind
> and ice hid sound
>
> only a moving
> with no note
> granite lips
> a stone throat.

As it does, for example, in "Laurentian Shield" (1945) and "Trees In Ice" (1931), Scott's economic language creates, in "Old Song," new perspectives on the Canadian landscape that are expressed through sharp images of small elements of that landscape, such as the furrow in "March Field," or the leaves and a river in "Old Song." Indeed, it is not even the river itself we are shown, but only its movement or "silent flowing." These are neither the evocative descriptions of such poets as Roberts and Lampman, nor the reflections in the landscape of nebulous or inflated emotion of the poets of a tired strain of Romanticism. Scott's Laurentian landscape in "Old Song" emerges from images that weave an emotional response to the fragility and transitoriness of human experience with the concept of an ageless and relentless land. In Scott's vision, as Djwa suggests in her remarks about this poem, "the land is associated with timeless process; man, in contrast, like the leaves, is seen as transitory, evanescent, a brief interval in the continuing processes of nature" ("A New Soil" 11).

The leaves are described ambiguously as "fretting." Does this adjective refer to an emotion or to an aesthetic activity? If the leaves are to be perceived as being anxious, Scott's poem provides another instance of the preference of a late Canadian Romanticism for the pathetic fallacy. Perhaps, however, the sound of the breeze through the leaves actively decorates, or ornaments, the hillsides in this landscape. The word "fretting" creates a metaphor. Like the fingerboard ridges on a string instrument, these leaves are part of the landscape that functions as an instrument to accompany the river's primeval singing. Coleridge's aeolian harp has been transplanted and reconfigured in a context that is both an indigenous environment for the new poetry of the McGill poets and older than the Romantic traditions that influenced the poetry they want to displace. Melted glacial water, the river establishes a continuity between primordial geological time ("out of long aeons" [9]) and the sounds of the river as it flows over granite rocks. A remnant of that primordial period, the granite provides the river with its throat and lips; like the "fretting leaves," it is part of the landscape through which the ancient music is accorded a voice.

Scott's poems present active elements in the landscape, transitional moments in the seasons, and the struggles for individuality against the social norms of an urban environment; they give both a habitation and an identity to a kind of poetry emerging, in

1928 and 1929, in the pages The Canadian Mercury. The paradoxically silent song of the river does more than embody the idea of a timeless natural process; like the self-imposed exile of Smith's king in "Proud Parable," and "the lapping of water / on smooth, flat stones" in "The Lonely Land," it symbolizes "a beauty of dissonance" (ll. 22-24). Experimenting with style and form in his poems, and reassessing the nature of human experience in a changing world, Scott illustrates a transition from late Romanticism. These innovations constitute the modernist aesthetic of the Montreal movement.

Poems in The Canadian Mercury exhibit a Canadian Modernism in a moment of transition. Those of Muir, Hainsworth, Selfridge, and other minor poets reflect the presence of belated Romantic expressions, the poetry of "autumn skies-- / And autumn trees" that Klein's "Fixity" decries as "captured weeds" and "fossiled flies" (3-4). At the same time, Muir's "Yesterday," Hainsworth's "Sentimental," and Selfridge's "Gulls Inland" also anticipate advances on that aesthetic. The poems of Smith, Kennedy, and Scott reflect a struggle against the evocation of nature for the sake of nature and the use of conventional prosody for the sake of the conventions. They also disclose a move towards a modernist aesthetic. The opening editorial of The Canadian Mercury points to a change in the seasons of Canadian poetry:

> We have no preconceived idea of Canadian literature which we are endeavouring to propagate; our faith rests in the spirit which is at last beginning to brood upon the literary chaos. We believe that an order will come out of the void, an order of a distinct type, reflecting, as modern Canadian painting has begun to do, a unique experience of nature and life. (3)

In its poems, essays, and editorials, The Canadian Mercury reflects the emergence of one strand of Canadian modernist poetry. Ross's poems published, at the same time, in The Dial indicate that, also emerging, was another strand.

CHAPTER 3

"TOWARDS A SHARPER TANG": W. W. E. ROSS'S PARADOXICAL AESTHETIC

> Music changes day by day;
> music shall take our souls away.
>
> W. W. E. Ross, "Music for our ears"

Published the same year as were the first issues of The Canadian Mercury, the poems of Ross that appear in The Dial exemplify a strain of Modernism that diverges from that of his contemporaries, the McGill poets. Like other Modernists, Ross invites readers to learn new ways of reading both poetry and the world we experience. Part XXII of Williams's Spring and All (1923), frequently anthologized as "The Red Wheelbarrow," begins:

> So much depends
> upon
> a red wheel
> barrow. (ll. 1-4)

In the paradoxical aesthetic of W. W. E. Ross, everything depends on how we look at a poem and view the world through its aesthetic. His poems have received significant critical attention, but much of the discussion focuses on his first volume of poems, Laconics[17]. This chapter will discuss the poems that Ross published in The Dial, and aspects of a second volume, Sonnets, which was published two years after Laconics. Ross wrote his sonnets, however, during the same period (1923-1930) as he wrote those he published in The Dial and collected in Laconics. His poems in The Dial reflect the style and some of the themes in Laconics. After the exact, imagist-like poems of that collection, Ross returned to their ideas but with a different prosody. His paradoxical modernist aesthetic develops through the prosody, metaphors, and aesthetic concerns reflected in both Sonnets and his poems in The Dial. These poems seek a way of understanding fleeting and fragmentary aspects of human experience in a changing world that challenges the unchanging music of Canadian Romanticism in Canada in the 1920s.

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[17] Ross's poetry has been assessed largely by examining Laconics and other poems that are similar in style. Anne Compton's article, "W. W. E. Ross: Imagism and the Poetics of Early Twentieth Century" (1996), discusses the influence of both Imagism and Impressionism on the poems of Laconics; Don Precosky, in "W. W. E. Ross and His Works" (1987), also pays attention to Laconics and summarily dismisses the importance of Sonnets. In his essay, "On W. W. E. Ross" (1969), Peter Stevens discusses Sonnets, as

This chapter studies Ross's aesthetic. The first section discusses three of his poems and identifies elements of that aesthetic. A second section sketches the literary environment that prevails when his poems are published in The Dial. The prosody of these poems, and their juxtaposition of traditional forms with his experimental style, the subjects of a third section, form, in effect, a response by Ross to Arthur Stringer's call for Canadian poets to engage with modernist free verse. A summary of arguments, which have been put forward by four critics about Ross's engagement with early forms of Modernism, namely Imagism and Impressionism, constitutes the subject of discussion in a fourth section. A fifth proposes that Ross's poems in The Dial represent an interesting point of departure for Canadian Modernism because, by parallelling Cubism, a post-impressionist development, Ross aestheticises the transitory nature of human experience.

Ross develops the process of aestheticising experience further in his Sonnets. The sixth section of this chapter argues that these poems demonstrate a failed attempt to recover aspects of premodernist aesthetic practices. A seventh section concludes the

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well as other poems by Ross, including those published in both The Dial and Souster's collection, Experiments: 1923-1929 (1956), but there has been little discussion of those in The Dial since. Both A. R. Kizuk's article "Canadian Poetry in the 'Twenties" (1986), and Trehearne's book, Aestheticism and the Canadian Modernists, argue that, together, Laconics and Sonnets illustrate the development of Ross's aesthetic. In his essay, "W. W. E. Ross: Imagism, Science, Spiritism" (1995), Whiteman includes a brief discussion of Sonnets and Ross's interest in spiritualism.

chapter by arguing that Ross's failure, and his use of metaphors taken from spiritualism, give rise to his distinct contribution to Canadian Modernism. Ross's aesthetic acknowledges a paradox about beauty in the modern world: though the truths that emerge through an aesthetic vision cannot be reduced to lines and imagery, poetry may enable us to perceive elements of reality that lie beyond the penetrations of reasoned thought and of ethical or scientific discourse. His poetry permits us a glimpse of an elusive, protean world and offers us a means by which we may apprehend our experiences of such a reality.

I

A discussion of three poems by Ross will introduce elements of his paradoxical aesthetic. In a letter to Smith in 1944, Ross included "Air With Variations," in which, taking Coleridge's poems, "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," as his point of departure, he parodies forty-two poets. Among them are figures of Anglo-American Modernism, such as Pound, Eliot, and Stevens whose works he had admired. He also includes his contemporaries Moore and E. E. Cummings (1894-1962), as well as Smith, Scott, and Klein. Finally, he also parodies himself:

> Day after day with weary eye
> We searched the sea and searched the sky,
> Fearing we'd made a bad mistake,
> For this was no fresh water lake. (7 October 1948; Darling 88)[18]

The methodical repetition of lines of iambic tetrameter, reminiscent of the beat of a metronome which Pound and Flint wanted to replace with "the rhythm of the musical phrase" (Flint 199), poke fun at his experimental verse in Laconics and at his sonnets. The pairing of "eye" and "sky" satirizes Romanticism's concept of inner vision, and the rhyming of "mistake" with "lake" is amusing, especially in view of the prevalence of water imagery in his poems.

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[18] References to Ross's letters include the date of the letter and the page on which it may be found in Darling's collection or the number given to it in Whiteman's.

Ross's parodies indicate the enjoyment he found playing with patterns of sounds. That enjoyment takes a more serious turn as he experiments with the sound patterns required of sonnets. Most of the poems in Sonnets, are Petrarchan in form, although "On Love" (1932) is an example of an English sonnet. The Petrarchan sonnet requires a repetition of two rhyming sounds in the octave. "Dream-Way" (1932) is one of the poems in Sonnets that uses this conventional pattern ("abbaabba"). Its rhymes underscore a dream-like mood of uncertain appearances ("shades and shadows teem") in dark and ominous surroundings:

> In may be that the country of a dream
> Illuminated, or remaining dim or dark,
> Resembles that low shore where souls embark
> Into the zone where shades and shadows teem;
> With no more than a momentary gleam
> From higher spheres.--Before them, grim and stark,
> They see a vessel on that water dark,
> And all surroundings threatening, ominous seem. (1-8)

The Petrarchan sonnet invites the poet to play, in the sestet, with a variety of sounds. Ross's poems exhibit a variety of patterns but, in what seems to have been his preferred arrangement, each of the first three of a sestet's lines ends with a different sound which is repeated in the last three. Thus, for example, the first and last lines of the sestet in "The Lake" (1932), another poem in Sonnets and one that will be discussed later in this section, enclose two more pairs of rhymes. The pattern, "cddeec," may be schematically represented, with the use of parentheses, as:

(pull [high/by, striving/diving] beautiful).

It is an appropriate pattern for an image in which the body of a diver is "enclosed" in a watery grave. In other sonnets, however, the last three lines repeat the sequence of sounds established in the first half of the sestet ("cdedec"). The sestet in "Dream Way" exemplifies this pattern:

> It may be so, that Dream Death's brother is.
> That dream, that region, all shall know some day

Or soon, the dream that merges into death.
The zone of dreams, now known, may be the way,
May be the path that surely leads beneath
To solving of these lasting mysteries. (9-14)

The rhymes highlight the poem's conceit. Death is not an ending but the path to an understanding of the mysteries of existence.

Ross's self-parody reflects something of his serious concerns. In the search for a way to make poetry new, the desire to navigate the seas of the Romantic aesthetic is, in his view, a "bad mistake." As "The Lake" and "The Diver" (1927) exemplify, images of water reflect features of Ross's aesthetic. "The Diver" was published in Poetry in 1934 and later included in Shapes and Sounds. Telling Gustafson that he was right to include it in his anthology, Ross added that this poem "actually indicated, in 1928, my own future course to date" (20 March 1950; Darling 95). In its sparse diction, stanzas that are organized by sentences rather than linear rhythms and rhymes, and its water imagery "The Diver" reflects the prosody of poems in Laconics, such as "In the ravine" (1928), "Island with trees" (1930), and "Fish" (1930). It invites us to imagine a sensual experience:

I would like to dive
Down
Into this still pool
Where the rocks at the bottom are safely deep,

Into the green
Of the water seen from within,
A strange light
Streaming past my eyes--

Things hostile,
You cannot stay here, they seem to say;
The rocks, slime-covered, the undulating

Fronds of weeds--

And drift slowly
Among the cooler zones;
Then, upward turning
Break from the green glimmer

Into the light
White and ordinary of the day
And the mild air,
With the breeze and the comfortable shore.

Cast in five quatrains, these are lines of free verse rather than demonstrations of conventional prosody. They are constructed from irregular metrical patterns. The second stanza, for example, begins with the mellifluous use of anapests and iambs ("Into the green / Of the water) that is enhanced by the rhyming of "green" with the word typed directly below it, "seen." The stanza that follows opens with a line of amphibrachic monometer ("Things hostile") and closes with one of amphimacric monometer ("Fronds of weeds"). Enclosed within these lines are two that may be described, generally, as iambic pentameter. These irregular metrical patterns echo the rhythms of natural speech in which the lines are organized by an idea or an image ("You cannot stay here," and "Fronds of weeds") rather than poetic metre.

Lines of free verse arranged, paradoxically, in quatrains, together with the sounds they produce, underscore the elusive, sensual imagery of the poem. A "strange light" in green water streams past the speaker's eyes (7-8) while, below him, are "slime-covered" rocks and "undulating / Fronds of weeds" (11-12). The experience is also an encounter with a threatening reality; under the surface of an apparently "still pool" (3) what the diver sees are "Things hostile" (9). Quite unlike much of the vapid poetry of the 1920s, this poem uses sensory detail and active verbs; dive, see, stream, say, drift, turn, and break. The equilibrium suggested by "stay" is not possible and beauty is not a quality that can be reproduced in poetry. It reflects an active world, not stasis. Ross aestheticises experience. An aspect of reality may be perceived, but not to its full extent or meaning. The speaker cannot stay in the world of water; reality eludes attempts to reduce it to poetic discourse.

In a letter to Smith, Ross wrote that "the longer lines" of sonnets seemed to him better suited "to express ideas adequately" (20 March 1950; Darling 95). One of his sonnets, "The Lake" appears to explore again the ideas of "The Diver." Its octave describes the seductive appearance of a cold, glassy lake into which, in the sestet, a stranger dives "in youthful glory" and drowns:

> A beautiful and shining lake there was,
> Its surface of a smoothness like a mirror
> That has been made and polished without error
> Most carefully, of finest moulded glass--
> Inviting still the eyes of all who pass
> And tempting them to turn and draw yet nearer,
> Like a siren bold who ravishes each hearer
> To lure him on to perish there, alas!
> He looked on it who felt temptation's pull
> To bathe therein although the banks were high
> Snow-covered, cold: this stranger passing by
> The peril of the lake was filled with striving,
> One moment seen in youthful glory diving,
> Then chilled and dead in water beautiful.

Instead of the immediacy and certainty of "The Diver," this sonnet presents a detached and hesitant perspective. The speaker does not participate in the scene but watches it. There are no specific or tangible images but generalizations. In "The Lake," for example, the descriptions are vague and indistinct. The colour of the water in this lake, unlike that in "The Diver," and whatever objects are on its bed are not identified; the lake is simply described, in the first line, as "beautiful and shining." The speaker in "The Diver" is confident in his perception that, however attractive the water may seem, it is a hostile environment in which he cannot stay, and so he returns to "the comfortable shore" (20).

By contrast, the diver in "The Lake" does not return.

The simile comparing the lake with a mirror suggests that the real nature of this fresh water cannot be directly understood or completely perceived. Ultimately, the actions of the speaker, rather than those of the water or the diver, reflect the ideas Ross sought to express in this sonnet. It does not present us with the experience of diving below the water's surface, but turns both the lake and the diver into aesthetic objects. Like "finest moulded glass," the lake tempts "the eyes of all who pass." We learn little about that diver, apart from his youth and his gender. It is his transformation into an object of beauty that is important: the subject of this poem is the speaker's act of aestheticising the diver and the lake.

An aesthetic reading of "The Diver" and "The Lake" precludes readings in which poetry plays a secondary role as the bearer of insights from another kind of knowledge. In a letter to Gustafson, for example, Ross recalls that, while working as a surveyor in the summer of 1912, he had followed the route which, only the year before, Tom Thomson had taken when he left the C. P. R. line at Kapuskasing to travel farther by canoe (23 September 1956; Whiteman No 36). It may be tempting to read in these two poems allusions to the hidden circumstances of Thomson's drowning in July 1917, or to that of Raymond Knister, to whose death, in August of the year in which Sonnets was published, Ross refers in another letter to Gustafson (14 November 1940; Whiteman No 1). Unlike Milton's "Lycidas" (1638), however, neither "The Diver" nor "The Lake" is an elegiac expression of a historically verifiable loss; these poems by Ross are late expressions of the Aesthetes's slogan, "art for art's sake." Here art, in the form of poetry, both immerses itself in, and detaches itself from, the world. In Ross's hands, for the consequences of the aesthetic are that we apprehend what biographical, moral, or scientific discourse cannot "stream" past our eyes, and we create new ideas about ourselves and our relationships with the world. As in "The Diver," beauty in "The Lake" is an active process by which the meaning of our experience may be glimpsed and refracted, but not fully or adequately contained within any discourse.

In Williams's "Red Wheelbarrow," so much of our understanding of the poem depends on whether or not we can see both a wheel and a cart, each in its own line, and also a wheelbarrow moving through the lines. Part of the paradox of Ross's aesthetic is that it rejects attempts to fix the reality of our experience in poetic language, attempts that render our experience as beautiful, and as dead, as the diver's body in "The Lake." His aesthetic repudiates the pretended certainties of late Canadian Romanticism. In one of his letters to Gustafson, Ross mentions Wilson MacDonald, his contemporary who exemplifies a languishing aesthetic. He would have liked, he writes, "to punch Wilson MacDonald on the nose" (19 August 1959; Whiteman No 51). The rejection of fixed perceptions of reality, however, is only half of the paradox. The other half is that an aesthetic that acknowledges the danger of wanting to stay in the world it envisions, or forgets its finite limitations, may catch, through its sensory language, glimpses of a reality that is as elusive as the quality of underwater light.

II

Not surprisingly, much of the poetry for which Ross is usually remembered reflects, in its sensory details, the lakes and bush of northern Ontario. Although born in Peterborough, Ross reminds us in a letter to Gustafson that he was raised in Pembroke on the Ottawa River, summered with his family at Petawawa, worked as a high school student in a sawmill and, while studying at the University of Toronto, spent two summers as a surveyor near Sudbury and north of Lake Superior. Graduating from the University of Toronto in 1914 with a degree in chemistry, he left to serve in England during the First World War. He settled in Agincourt in 1923, where he was a geophysicist on the staff of the Dominion Magnetic Observatory. There he began his dual careers as scientist and poet.

This was an era of dramatic economic and political change for much of Canada, when literary values of the past coexisted with new directions. The 1920s, for example, saw the publication of such modernist landmarks as the experimental novels by Joyce (Ulysses [1922]) and Woolf (To the Lighthouse [1927]), and Eliot's poem, The Waste Land (1922). Both Stringer's Open Water and Call's Acanthus and Wild Grape had already been published when, between 1923 and 1927, Pratt published four volumes: Newfoundland Verse (1923), The Witches Brew (1925), The Titans (1926), and The Iron

Door (1927). As Pratt, whose role Djwa identifies in the title of her essay, "The 1920s: E. J. Pratt, Transitional Modern" (1977), was writing, other departures occurred in Canadian literature. Raymond Knister's modernist novel, The White Narcissus, was published in 1929, but realism--exemplified by two novels by F. P. Grove (1879-1948), the Settlers of the Marsh (1925) and Our Daily Bread (1929)--dominated prose fiction. Scott and Smith launched The McGill Fortnightly Review in 1925 and The Canadian Mercury in 1928, signalling the desire of a new generation of writers to engage with elements of Anglo-American modernist literature.

In the context of this literary activity, Ross experiments with modernist poetics. In contrast to the output of his contemporaries, such as Pratt, Smith, and Livesay, Ross's is slight. He produced, apart from publications in magazines of poetry, only two slender volumes, Laconics and Sonnets. Raymond Souster compiled a brief collection of Ross's poems entitled Experiment 1923-29 and, with John Robert Colombo, he edited a more extensive collection, Shapes and Sounds. Ross's modest achievement, nevertheless, offers evidence of a distinct strain of Canadian Modernism.

It has become commonplace to suggest that Canada found its identity on the battlefields of the First World War and at the peace conference tables thereafter. Canadian writing in English in the first decades of the twentieth century may also be regarded as a series of battles and conferences marked by struggles to continue, or break with, literary conventions, to form questions about national identity, and to define the relationship between Canadian poetry and the poetry developing beyond Canada's borders. In 1928, Pratt's national epics lay in the future, but Smith's essay, "Wanted--Canadian Criticism," appeared that year in the Canadian Forum. Critical of what he regarded as the sentimental and brand-name nationalism of the Canadian Authors Association, Smith called for a harder, more intellectual kind of poetry. Just around the corner was Ross's "Foreword" to Laconics; the poem announces a point of departure for his aesthetic:

> These pieces in
> a style more "North American,"
> perhaps, or in

a manner more "Canadian"
than the most [sic]
of what has been put down in verse
in Canada,
are not asserted to be so;

But it is hoped
that they will seemingly contain
something of
what quality may mark us off
from older Europe,--
something "North American"--
and something of the sharper tang of Canada.

The relationship between Ross's poetry and a Canadian literary identity is distinct from both the cloying poetry that Smith would later designate as "maple fudge" ("Canadian Anthologies" [1942] 458) and from the remnants of an earlier kind of nationalist sentiment, that of imperial federation with Great Britain. In his early poems, Ross tells Gustafson, he searched for a form of poetry that would be new "and yet not 'free verse.'" In 1925, he adds, he developed what he calls a "laconics form" because he wanted to find a poetry "that would be unrhymed and yet definitely a 'form.'" He also wanted a "native" form (23 September 1956; Whiteman No 36). Ross's northernness and Canadian "tang" emerge in a framework of "something 'North American'" rather than from an engagement with the aesthetic of an "older," or premodernist, Europe and Britain, with which much Canadian poetry was still occupied.

III

In 1928, nine poems by Ross[19] appeared in two successive issues of The Dial, a magazine published in New York City. According to James D. Hart, The Dial began in Chicago in 1890 as a conservative monthly journal of literary criticism and later moved to New York where it became a vehicle of radical opinion and new literature. The editorial staff favoured a cosmopolitan approach, inviting discussions and reviews of art and literature from Europe and the United States, and offering its readers poetry, short stories, and some visual art (Hart 200). A glance at the list of contributors in issues from the early decades of the twentieth century reads like a "who's who" of the experimental arts.[20] Here, among what have since become significant milestones in the history of modernist literature, Pound's sequence, "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," which is accompanied by a sketch of Pound by Wyndham Lewis, and Eliot's celebrated work, The Waste Land, were first published. At its peak in 1924, the journal had a circulation of 18,000, no small feat for a "little magazine." From 1925 until 1929, when the journal collapsed on the eve of the crash of the stock market and the onset of the Great Depression, Marianne Moore served as the journal's chief editor. It was during her tenure that Ross's poems appeared; later she would write favourable reviews of his collections, praising Laconics for its tendency to seek "better explicitness and simpler simplicities" ("Experienced" 281) and Sonnets as the work of one of "the conspicuous poets of the day" ("Modern" 114).

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[19] These poems are reprinted in the appendix at the end of this dissertation where they are arranged in alphabetical order of their titles or first lines.

"Soldiery" and "In the ravine" appear in the April 1928 issue of The Dial under the simple title of "Two Poems." "Seven Poems" appeared in the August issue of the magazine; except for two of these poems, "Sonnet," and "Impression of New York," they are untitled. That most of these poems are identified by their first lines suggests there is something incomplete about them. Without titles which summarize symbols or foreground images, we must look immediately to the language of the poems, their lines, and their images, if we are to learn to read them and discern their meaning. "Soldiery" (1928) confronts us with clear, concise imagery and irregular lines punctuated by spaces:

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[20] Among its contributors were Richard Aldington (1892-1962), Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941), Djuna Barnes (1892-1982), E. E. Cummings (1894-1962), Eliot, Ford Madox Ford (1873-1939), Joyce, D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930), Lewis, Amy Lowell (1874-1925), Thomas Mann (1875-1955), Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Pound, Proust, Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), Carl Sandburg (1878-1967), Williams's, Yvor Winters (1900-1968), and Yeats.

they
with keen blades go
marching marching
over the earth

while the sun rides
and the wind glides. (8-13)

The fragmented lines provide direct description of specific elements. Together with a lyrical, closing couplet, they create an ethereal image of disparate elements joined in the energy of motion. Direct treatment of falling snow in a second poem, "In the ravine," is modulated by the conscious presence of the speaker and by the single use of the adverb, "gracefully":

In the ravine I stood
and watched the snowflakes
falling into the stream
into the stream
flowing gracefully between
banks of snow. (1-6)

Here, too, disparate elements, snowflakes and the black water of a creek, are joined in a calm but dynamic motion. The melting snow fills the creek "to the brim" and the creek itself is set in motion by a verb and two prepositions isolated at the ends of the lines:

The black water
of the winter creek came
around a bend above
and disappeared
around a bend below. (7-11)

Pathetic fallacy is replaced here with a direct treatment of fragments of natural objects and the vagueness of late Romanticism with sharp images; these poems bear the marks of Imagism. At the same time, the keenness of the blades in "Soldiery" and the graceful snowfall in "In the ravine" are descriptive comments that undermine Imagism's austere desire to treat things directly. Ross is aware of Imagism, but he also draws on other experiments in modernist literature and painting.

"Impressions of New York," in its title, fragmented lines and clash of images borrows elements from impressionist painting. Like "Oread" (1924) by H. D. (Hilda Doolittle)" Ross's "Flowers" (1928") presents a single, taut image but "Lions" (1928) presents, in its fragmented lines, a series of images that distance contemporary society from other human experiences: "Lions / leaping on the plain /shall not chase man again" (17-20). This intrusion into the poem of something other than imagist prosody reflects Ross's desire to find something closer to what he called, in one of his letters to Smith, "the 'clean' language of free verse" (20 March 1950; Darling 95). "Sonnet" (1928) is a Petrarchan sonnet that meditates on death, and "An iron railway bridge" (108-109), which opens with a sentence fragment, consists of a succession of fleeting images in six rhyming quatrains. In these poems, the apposition of traditional forms and Impressionism opens a way for a departure from the Romanticism represented, for example, in the poetry of Wilson MacDonald. His experiments aestheticise urban and rural landscapes; they generate new perceptions of human experience and changing reality.

Imagism, an Anglo-American literary phenomenon of the second decade of the twentieth century, became unsustainable by the end of the First World War.[21] Why was Ross using imagist poetics from 1923 to 1928? A list of the names of poets who were also published in The Dial in 1928 provides at least a partial answer: Hart Crane (1899-1932), Archibald MacLeish (1892-1982), Pound, Williams, Winters and Louis Zukofsky

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[21] Pound had moved from his imagist poetry of Ripostes (1912) and his brief discussion of imagist aesthetic in Poetry in 1913, to his pronouncements on Vorticism and participation with Wyndham Lewis and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska in the new, if short-lived, journal of 1914, Blast. His experiments with longer forms, as in "Homage to Sextus Propertius," which he wrote between 1917 and 1918, and his interest in translations led him away from the succinctness and simplicity of Imagism. In 1914, Pound edited an anthology, Des Imagistes; three further anthologies, edited by Amy Lowell, came to an end in 1917.

(1904-1978).[22] These poets would come to represent major developments in American poetry of the early and middle twentieth century.

Among this crowd, Moore included the work of two Canadian poets, Ross and Smith, the latter represented by "Journey," "The Creek," "Prothalamium," and "The Shrouding." The presence of the work of both poets signifies developments in Canadian Modernism. Her inclusion of poems by Ross in a journal that is dedicated to presentations and discussions of the "new" in art and literature suggests that Ross was not regarded as a Johnny-Canuck-come-lately picking up an extinguished American contribution to international literary Modernism. On the contrary, his poems in The Dial signify that he struck others as a serious poet struggling to write poetry for a new age and finding a way to contribute to its changing music or, in other words, to develop a new aesthetic. Stringer's foreword in Open Water had satirized the state of Canadian poetry; whether Ross knew as much or not, his in The Dial take up Stringer's challenge.

IV

The relationship of the work of Ross to Imagism and Impression is discussed by four important critics. In his "Memoir," Callaghan argues that Ross's use of Imagism constitutes the foundation of his poetic achievement. Precosky, in "W. W. E. Ross and His Works," concurs, but he also argues that Ross's poetry does not belong in the forefront of Canadian Modernism. Instead, he places it in a transitional zone moving towards Modernism. Trehearne's Aestheticism and the Canadian Modernists and Anne Compton's "W. W. E. Ross: Imagism and the Poetics of Early Twentieth Century" both find Ross's aesthetic overdetermined not so much by Imagism as by literary and artistic Impressionism. The notes conceived by Pound and published under Flint's name, as well as Pound's "A Few Don'ts," are perhaps the most famous, if least explicit, descriptions of Imagism. They do not offer a theory about a new aesthetic; rather, they imply new ideas. The relationship between truth and beauty is constructed not by the deployment of the forms, lines, and rhetorical figures of an older prosody, but by hard images generated through simple and direct language. That, a decade later, poems by Ross make use of imagist strategies does not so much answer as raise the question about his relationship with Imagism. In 1912, to repeat a widely rehearsed modernist legend, Ezra Pound told Richard Aldington and H. D. over cups of tea that they were "imagistes."[23] Was Ross, too, an "imagiste?"

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[22] Works by these poets published in The Dial in 1928 include Crane's "The Air Plant" and "The Mermen"; MacLeish's "Poem"; Pound's "Canto XXII" and part of "XXVII" along with one of his translations, "Donna Mi Prega"; Williams's "The Men," "The Lily," "On Gay Wallpaper," and "The Source"; Winters's "Song of the Trees"; and Zukofsky's "Four Poems."

Shapes and Sounds, published two years after Ross's death, was the first commercially available collection of his work. The book begins with Callaghan's memoir, the function of which is to set Ross's poems in "their rightful historical place in Canadian literature" (7). He meant that they are the work of "the first modern poet in Canada" (3). What makes them modern poetry, suggests Callaghan, is their participation in Imagism, "the base of all modern verse" and the reason why, in Callaghan's judgement, poetry by Ross "remains fresh and vivid" (4).

Callaghan's labelling of Imagism as the "base of all modern verse" is excessive. Yeats was not an imagist. Eliot was not either, although it may be argued that he used some elements of Imagism. The contributions of the symbolist movement and impressionist painting, together with interests in haiku and other elements of Japanese and Chinese literature and art, have been widely noted. Nevertheless, during the second decade of the twentieth century, Imagism was an influential movement through its literary journal, The Egoist and its anthologies, and as a result of the organizational skills of Pound and Lowell. More to the point, Callaghan regards Imagism as the base of

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[23] Peter Jones, in Imagist Poetry (1972), relates an incident in a teashop in which Pound made this pronouncement (17). In A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode (1976), David Perkins relates the same incident (330). Humphrey Carpenter, in A Serious Character (1990), locates the birth of Imagism in connection with a visit by Pound, Doolittle, and Aldington to the British Museum, at which time Pound seized the manuscript of one of Hilda's poems, edited it on the spot, and baptized her "H. D., Imagiste" so that he could keep his contract with Harriet Munroe and send new poems to Poetry (187); Steven Watson, in Strange Bedfellows (1991), repeats this anecdote (66).

Ross's verse. Flint's notes call for the "direct treatment of the thing," an avoidance of words that do not "contribute to the presentation," and the rhythm of the musical phrase rather than that of the metronome (199). Pound's "A Few Don'ts" underscores these principles, with its warnings about superfluous adjectives, abstractions, ornaments, and iambs. Callaghan, it would seem, reads Ross's poems against this background. He reproduces the first stanzas of "Rocky Bay" (1930) and "Pine Gum" (1929), and offers his summary assessment: "[t]he picture couldn't be sharper. It couldn't be cleaner. There are no operatic effects" (6).

What informs Callaghan's construct of Imagism, however, is not the 1913 manifesto or other statements by Pound to which he alludes, but rather the preface to Amy Lowell's anthology, Some Imagist Poets (1916). Written by Richard Aldington while he was the editor of The Egoist, the preface delineates six principles of the Imagist movement. The use of exact diction and avoidance of decorative language, the creation of new rhythms, and the freedom of subject matter are the first three. The fourth principle argues that Imagism is not "cosmic" poetry but the presentation of an image that "renders particulars exactly" and eschews generalities, and the fifth proposes "poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite," while his sixth principle asserts that "concentration is the very essence of poetry" (vii). Paying attention to the central and concrete qualities of an image free from abstractions, Callaghan argues that in the poetry of Ross we find "the conviction that the image in itself communicates meaning." Ross's images, he notes, "are complete and self-sufficient poems, seizing reality in a quick but perfect observation." Poems with images of trees, lakes, and divers, he argues, "exist in themselves" and not as part of any "moral design" (5).

Callaghan's memoir begins with his personal reminiscences of Ross and concludes with a short analysis of Ross's poems in which he repeats much of Aldington's preface and borrows quite directly from his fifth and sixth principles:

> Each word and each phrase is exact, not nearly right or merely decorative. There is no surface verbal complexity, no comfortable moralizing, no deliberate stylishness. Only poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred or indefinite. It is the most difficult kind of verse. Each image succeeds and

> fails in itself–no fancy writing covers up imaginative weakness. Concentration and objectivity are the essence of these short poems. Concentration in pursuit of the objects Hulme thought incomprehensible--the trees, the rocks, the silence--the Canadian landscapes. (5; my emphasis)

It is significant for several reasons that Callaghan writes in this way about Ross. First, he offers readers an informal and personal introduction to Ross's poems. The Ross whom we first meet in this memoir is an elderly, reclusive poet who has never had his place in history acknowledged. It would seem that it was his personality, and not his paradoxical aesthetic, that prevented Ross from being more successfully published. Referring to the 1913 Imagist documents and drawing on Aldington's preface, Callaghan creates a place in history for Ross; he sets the poet he recalls in the context of American Imagism. Ross's place now asserted, his poems on "the trees, the rocks, the silence--the Canadian landscapes" are worthy of publication and reading in 1968, a year after the feverish nationalism of Centennial Year.

In "W. W. E. Ross and His Works," Precosky takes up Callaghan's argument and elaborates on it. Ross's poetry," he suggests, "is probably the purest example of Imagism ever written by a Canadian" (168). Imagism accounts for the experimental nature of Ross's early poems but, contrary to Callaghan's judgement, Precosky does not present Ross as Canada's first modernist poet. Rather, in Precosky's judgement, he was a "transitional" Modernist. With this label, he adapts Djwa's assessment of Pratt. The transitional nature of the poetry of Pratt and Ross, argues Precosky, is disclosed in their use of "both conventional and new forms" which "effected a fusion between the Canadian nationalist tradition and modern experiments" (168). In Precosky's view, the Imagism of Ross emerges from a desire for a Canadian poetry and an engagement with an international literary aesthetic. It is, however, an engagement by an isolated poet for, as Callaghan points out, Ross was never a member of the Imagist group (5). Precosky adds that not only was Ross not part of the McGill group, but he also rejected Smith's idea of cosmopolitan poetry.

Precosky's point is that Ross's conscious choice of imagist strategies in Laconics, and in poems written after Sonnets enabled him to express a Canadian identity. Precosky does not consider the poems in The Dial; rather, after a brief glance at Sonnets, which he dismisses as a failed "stab at traditional poetry," he uses poems from Laconics and from Shapes and Sounds to describe how the poetry of Ross works. He pays particular attention to Ross's use of concrete imagery, of poems linked together as a way of enhancing their meaning, and of forms that employ free verse, various patterns of metres and, occasionally, rhyme. Precosky concludes that Ross's choice of Imagism, therefore, enabled him to experiment with poetry that would make this transitional Modernist significant in Canadian literary history (185).

The tendency to read Ross as an imagist poet is challenged by more recent critics. Trehearne argues that Ross, like Raymond Knister, has been misread as an Imagist for two principal reasons. First, critics have failed to assess correctly the nature of Imagism and its relation to literary Impressionism and the Aesthetic movement. Second, the assessment of Ross as an imagist poet has been derived from a reading of Laconics and later poems. Such a reading has resulted in what Trehearne calls "the lost portion of his canon" (30), namely Sonnets. A fuller understanding of the complete works of Ross in a broader context of literary influences, Trehearne argues, reveals his work as "adaptations of the initial Imagist impulse" (61), which are determined largely by literary Impressionism.

Trehearne's study of Modernism, and what he posits as its precursors, namely, Aestheticism and Imagism, includes discussions of the poetry of Scott, Glassco, and Smith. In an early chapter on Knister and Ross, Trehearne negotiates the slippery ground of defining Imagism. Ross's imagist strategies include the use of the short line and attention to precise objects, but if Pound's Image (the juxtaposition of metaphors without subordination) was the defining element of Imagism, suggests Trehearne, it was not the determining element in the poetry of Ross (49). Arguing that Imagism is only one of the precursors to Modernism, he also argues that in order to assess its influence on Canadian poets we need to define it against another such precursor, namely, Impressionism, which has its roots in the Aesthetic movement. Significant for Trehearne's argument is a definition of Aestheticism as a preoccupation with beauty and its use of beauty as a figure for mutability and decay (33-34). Thus, while Ross's imagist, or modernist, poems deal conventionally with beauty in the natural world, his Sonnets seem preoccupied with beauty in the sense of nineteenth-century Aestheticism. "Contemplation of these twin faces of beauty in Ross's sharply divided oeuvre," writes Trehearne, "encourages a renegade understanding of this unique poet's achievement" (29).

In Trehearne's argument, Ross is a poet with a reputation for being an Imagist but one who, though employing certain imagist strategies, moves away from the central tenets of Imagism. Rather than employing direct and objective presentation, Ross imagines an experience that may not have happened "with lyric intensity in order to make it appear to have happened" (59). Trehearne concludes that

> Ross's subjectivity, then, affects many facets of his imagist poetics--it helps him to reject "direct treatment of the thing" in favour of imagining "the thing" in various states, past and future; it helps him to see beneath the surface of his chosen images to find human relevance, human content; it even alters, as he seeks to convey the precision of his mood, his manipulation of formal and stylistic properties. (59)

Callaghan identifies Ross's "rightful historical place in Canadian literature" as his participation in an early phase of Anglo-American Modernism. His brief reflections and cursory analysis of poems by Ross are intended only as a personal introduction to the collection. Precosky's discussion is more extensive. He dismisses Sonnets and attends to the imagist characteristics of Ross's other poetry. Trehearne's study complicates the picture, suggesting that Ross's significance does not lie in his being the first Canadian to work with Imagism or the Canadian who worked most fully with it; rather, the Ross who emerges from Trehearne's arguments is a poet who adapts to his own purposes elements from important currents in the literary movements that anticipated Modernism.

Compton takes up Trehearne's discussions of the relationship of Imagism and Impressionism. However, rejecting his sharp distinction between the two movements, she suggests that our understanding of Imagism's brief but significant existence deepens as we recognize its debt to Impressionism (50). The problem, therefore, is not with whether or not we read Ross as an Imagist but with whether or not we see the roots of Imagism in

Impressionism (59). Compton's genealogy of Ross's imagism begins, not with literary Impressionism, but with the French school of painting, a mode of painting in which, she argues, Canadians found justification for their continuing interest in nature. Impressionist painters broke with convention by refusing to represent landscape in ways that "memory, habit, or prescription told them to" and by gazing at the natural world as if "for the first time" (50). Their art, as she points out, influenced not only Canadian painters but also those poets whom she calls "the Canadian Imagists of the twenties and thirties," namely Ross, Knister, F. R. Scott, and Smith. What makes these poets impressionists is their attention to the constituent and changing elements of the landscape and not its size or grandeur (51). Of these poets, Ross draws Compton's attention. He becomes for her a poet through whose language Impressionism becomes Imagism, and whose Imagism discloses the influence of Impressionism. "For neither Smith nor Scott did the image suffice," she argues; "they wanted concepts." Ross's images, she continues, "are the purest acts of perception, and for Ross language is perception. In Ross's poetry [. . .] one finds an Impressionist with language: an Imagist. In Ross's Imagism, the Impressionist heritage is disclosed" (51).

According to Compton, the basis of painting for the French Impressionists was not in the treatment of historical, mythological, or religious subjects but in their experimentations with light and colour, which are means of an immediate and sensuous perception of reality (52), and in their habit of working directly from the scene. Thus impressionist painters rejected conventional strategies of perspectives and linear definition in order to represent the object directly. These, argues Compton, are elements Imagists take over from Impressionism. With that adoption comes an aesthetic of the moment in which the real is both visual and momentary (53).

Ross's "northernness," or "sharper tang," does not express a nationalist sense of place but a new aesthetic, for it represents his adaptation of Imagism to his perception of the light and mutability of his own environment. His attention to light and to how objects are configured in light is supplemented by his articulation of the "solidity of form, the shapes of things" (67). In Compton's essay, Ross's poetry becomes painting in words. Informed by the Impressionist program of capturing objects directly in the present moment of transition, Ross becomes not a transitional modern but a modernist poet of the transitory. Compton suggests that Ross uses words the way Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) used "colour as a means of modelling the underlying forms of visible objects" (67). Ross's accomplishment, therefore, is to render the "fleeting impression" and create images that memorialize and even monumentalize the object (67).

V

The nine poems by Ross in two issues of The Dial in 1928 constitute another point of departure for Canadian Modernism because, although they are marked with impressionist and imagist poetics, they are also "cubist" poems. The impressionist marks are clear. Images of a northern winter scene in "In the ravine," for example, of a city in its diversity in "Impression of New York," or of soldiers of "Soldiery" marching in wind and sunlight, emerge from a few sensory details. The lines suggest impressionist brush strokes: short and intense with selective repetition and dissociation, or fragmentation. Compton draws attention to a relationship between Impressionism in European painting and literary impressionism. By 1928, however, Impressionism had passed and art in Canada is being influenced, as it is in the United States and Europe, by Cubism. Ross's poems in The Dial reflect a dialogue with post-impressionist poetry.

If it is possible to talk about Impressionism in painting and about literary impressionism, is it also possible to talk about Cubism and a post-impressionist literature? Cubism, a new approach to the visual arts developed largely by Georges Braques, Juan Gris, and Pablo Picasso between 1907 and 1914, profoundly altered what occurs on the canvas and how a work in particular is "read" or perceived. On a Cubist canvas, planes intersect, merge, or fragment, and the shapes of objects combine and recombine in abstract form. Art historian John Canady points out that although, in its early analytical phase, Cubism tended to bury colour and other expressive values under its esoteric standards, the later phase of Synthetic Cubism restored these values to painting (432).

Cubism emerged initially without theory or codified standards; theory developed as the movement grew and reflected on its own practices. Francis Frascina points out that one of the sources of Cubist theorizing was Henri-Louis Bergson (1859-1941), remembered particularly for his ideas of duration and of an élan vital or life force. Among other things, the concept of duration refers to time experienced consciously as a continuous flux rather than as a succession of individual moments. Past, present, and future are not disjointed but coexist. Duration means that it becomes impossible to know the past because only the present is continually available. If this is so, then what matters on a canvas is the surface; we can experience only the present relations between shapes and volume. Bergson's idea of a life force underscores his sense of reality as constant flux. This life force is a process of change generating irreversible development and unrepeatable influence. Joyce and Woolf appropriated Bergson's concept of duration in the "stream of consciousness" of their novels, while George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) wrote his plays with the idea of the life force in mind. In Cubism, as Frascina points out, a consciousness of the present arises through shifting, transforming, and interpenetrating states of being (138). On the surface of the canvas, the several planes of an object intersect or alter each other. In so doing, they create multiple and fragmented views of an object or a figure.

In the poems Ross published in The Dial, a few impressionist sensory details shape new perceptions of time and space. The green water and sunlight of "Sonnet," for example, or the primary and earthen colours of revolving blossoms in "Flowers" and the yellow and tawny blur of sporting animals in "Lions" establish a concept of reality as being in a constant state of flux, fragmentary and fleeting. "In the ravine" presents an intimate view of a transitory moment of winter where nothing is frozen physically or aesthetically. Snow is not so much a thing as a thing in motion; it falls and it melts, its transitions underscored by selective repetition: "snowflakes / falling into the stream / into the stream." The stream is itself in motion:

> the winter creek   came
> around a bend   above
> and disappeared
> around a bench   below. (8-11)

To further highlight the continuing motion of this scene, when the creek is described a second time, Ross uses the same words but changes the pattern:

> Filled with melted snow
> to the brim
> the creek   came
> around a bend--
> and disappeared below
> around a bend--
> ground covered with snow. (12-18)

Dashes interrupt the poem's brief narrative, describing the creek in terms of intense actions of short duration. The lines in the text are themselves in motion, parallelling the snow and the water, the impressions of which they create. At the same time, the prepositions of place are like several planes on a two-dimensional canvas, intersecting and fragmenting each other. The stream before it comes into view and after it disappears, and the melting snow and the snow covering the ground, are not disjointed moments but expressions of an experience viewed simultaneously from several angles. "In the ravine" is clearly a post-impressionist poem.

Although visual details, especially those of colour, dominate these poems, there are also representations of sounds. The rhythm created by repetition in the third line of "Soldiery," for example, contributes to the image of men marching to the beat of their drum: "over the earth, over the earth." These soldiers, like the snow and water of "In the ravine," are part of a world of elements that are few in number but always in flux, coming and disappearing, like the ravine's stream. In "An iron railway bridge," the "clanging swerve" and whistle of a train in motion contrast with the black, steel lines on which the train moves and the "sluggard smoke" (4, 7, 16, 23). These contrasting sounds set the speaker's gaze in motion, as do the sounds of rivets and traffic in "Impression of New York."

Ross's selection of visual and auditory details, together with his attention to light, engages with Impressionism and its concern with direct perception and representation as his means of establishing an aesthetic with a sharper tang than Canadian poetry had yet generated. This preoccupation with directness, Compton points out, informs the impressionist approach of Auguste Renoir (1841-1919) and Monet, and of such writers as Rilke and Paul Valéry (1871-1945). They "transcribed their immediate sensuous apprehension of reality, in terms of light and colour, pre-empting the reduction of the impression to abstraction, into established categories" ("W. W. E." 52). Such a movement forms part of what enabled Impressionism to revolutionize European art. Similarly, the emergence of a post-Romantic aesthetic employing free verse and other poetic strategies also pre-empts the reduction of poetry to received conventions.

Compton compares Ross not so much to Renoir and Monet as to Cézanne, whose transposition of volume and space to elements of abstract geometry was one of the elements with which Picasso and Braque would construct a new aesthetic (428). Ross's poetry, argues Compton, sometimes approximates the painting of Cézanne. "'Flowers,'" she points out, "pulsates with colour" (63) and "Skyscrapers," a poem in Laconics, reconfigures the way things exist in relation to light (66).

Compton contends that Ross's Cézanne-like use of light and colour, or sensuous detail gives shape and substance to small objects in brief moments and exhibits an aesthetic that "articulates solidity of form, the shapes of things" (67). The solidity or shape of small objects (snow falling in a segment of a flowing creek, a summer afternoon in the sunlight beside a green river, taxis swarming like fish in New York City) discloses a process of fixing the mutable moment while denying the ability of an object to endure without change. "This is," suggests Compton,

> the paradox of the Impressionist's act. Rendering the fleeting impression, and that is all that is possible in changeability, confers a durability which is not inherent in the object. The aesthetic object (the image) does not, however, surpass the natural; that would be decadence. Not only does Ross (paradoxically) memorialize an object, his image also monumentalises the object. (67)

If Ross's poems are memorializations of fleeting impressions, they are also testimony to a sense of "duration," to a sense of reality defined, as a painting shaped within geometric abstractions, by the intersection of time and space. Within this intersection, experience is overdetermined by an irreversible flow or process of change.

Fleeting impressions and fragmentary objects in "In a ravine," for example, or a moment of reflection by a river in "Sonnet" celebrate transitory moments. "An iron railway bridge" presents a sequence of scenes both inside and outside a train, the effect of which is to create a collage of apparently simultaneous events. The railway bridge and tracks, the approach of the train, the gaze of "the first inventor" (11) and that of the speaker looking out the window, and the train's arrival are fragments of an object juxtaposed in this poem as they might be in a Cubist painting. Ross's poem, "Flowers," celebrates the momentary presence of colour in a garden without reference to a wider space in which these revolving flowers would emerge as disjointed elements, alienated from the rest of the world in the poem.

Compton suggests that Cézanne employed colour to create the substance and form of objects. If Ross's poetry can be compared to this aspect of Cézanne's painting, is it possible that his aesthetic, rather than memorializing the mutable moment, presents another perspective? His poetry aestheticises the fleeting moment. The desire of an earlier aesthetic for a fixed centre or an eternal beauty transformed art into a process of memorializing the mutable moment. Ross wants a sharper tang, the aesthetic of his sawmill. The meaning of a film that is projected onto a screen arises not from the freezing of each frame but from the rapid motion of the frames. Similarly, in Ross's poems for The Dial, the meaning of human experience emerges from the constant play of impressions and fragmented perceptions.

VI

At first glance, Sonnets, a collection of fifty-seven poems by Ross, appears to look back to the poetry of the Romantics and of the Aesthetic Movement and, thus, seems to be a retreat from Laconics. In the minds of his readers and critics, Ross is usually associated with the experimental lines and delicate sensory imagery. As both Kizuk and Trehearne point out, the Sonnets, although a substantial portion of Ross's work, has generally been ignored by critics of Canadian poetry (Kizuk 36; Trehearne 29). Like Roberts's Modernism, Ross's Sonnets, to paraphrase Roberts, steps aside from a Romantic aesthetic and moves towards that of Anglo-American Modernism. The poems, in fact, announce the death of an aesthetic in which the nature of beauty and the role of poetry previously appeared to be clear. They call for a new way of perceiving reality and human experience and they offer, through metaphors created from the language of spiritualism, an approach to such a new aesthetic.

Sonnets was enthusiastically received by Marianne Moore when it first came out. The title of her review, "Modern Thoughts in Disguise," is apposite, for Moore believes that, hidden in Ross's poems, which continue in the tradition of "the Spenser-Sidney-Milton-Wordsworth elegance," is a modern sensibility; his sonnets disclose a "freshness, responsibility, and authenticity of locality" (114-15). Ross's accomplishments with these poems mark him, in her judgement, as one of "the conspicuous poets of the day" (114). Moore concedes that this volume by Ross contains "an occasional defect" and, thinking it necessary to tell her readers that "poetry with the unforced note is rare," indicates some discomfort with Ross's prosody. Nevertheless, she gazes into the future and predicts that "if in matter and spirit the book is not valuable," she will be proved "far afield" (115). The obscurity which has enveloped Sonnets, however, would suggest that Moore miscalculated.

Ross's own retrospective assessment of his work is less effusive than Moore's earlier appraisal. In a letter to Smith nearly twenty years after the volume was published, he tells Smith that in Sonnets he had tried to keep a hand on the experimental approach of his earlier poetry while quietly stepping aside from it. He had tried, "from time to time," to revise Sonnets "but without success":

> The faults in language are too fundamental. I feel doubtful about some of the wording in the three you printed in your anthology. I think the Laconics [sic] are much better technically. Sonnets [sic] were a sort of exercise, a reactionary one, after my new departure in Laconics, 1925, which was based on a study of ancient prosody and no doubt influenced by my reading of some of the american [sic] poets. The general idea was to employ the "clean" language of free verse without the lack of rhythm or pattern which offended me in all of the latter except some of Pound etc. As regards Sonnets [sic] I had the notion that longer lines were needed to

> express ideas adequately and the sonnet form seemed suited to this purpose. I was ditched by my inability to carry over into them--the prestige of the models being so great--the aforesaid "cleanness." (20 March 1950; Darling 94-95)

Ross's sense, albeit with hindsight, that the collection had been an experiment should alert us to the possibility that his book was meant to do something other than rehearse a decayed Romanticism. The collection is explicitly philosophical; Ross's desire to "carry over" into these poems the structures and method, or the "cleanness," of his earlier work expresses his longing for a new aesthetic. Further, his retrospective sense of failure parallels a perspective that emerges from the sonnets themselves, namely, that earlier approaches to poetry are no longer accessible. Although Ross would continue to write poetry, including some translations, literary parodies, and a few poems in a style similar to his earlier ones, Sonnets is his last major work.

Ross arranged his sonnets in interesting groupings. The first group consists of eleven poems presenting images drawn from the myths and mysteries of classical Greece. Included are "The Piper of Pan," "Sappho," "Ion," and two sonnets entitled "Prometheus." Among a second group of eleven poems, we find "The Unseen Dwellers," "On the Supernatural," "The Call," and "The Pythagorean Basilica." This group employs the language of spiritualism, an occult movement of the late nineteenth century which enjoyed a revival in the 1920s and with which Ross was familiar. Eleven more form a third group entitled "On Beauty, Etc." This group includes "On Mythical Beauty," "Islands of Song," "On Flowers," "Blindness," "The Lake," and "Recognition." The poems are reveries, images of an imagined landscape, love poems and declarations about a poetry that provides new perspectives on experience and reality by aestheticising them. In the seven poems of the fourth group, "Somewhat 'Wordsworthian,'" Ross plays with an earlier aesthetic, using sonnets to look again at elements of the Ontario landscape in Laconics and to undermine a Romantic view of nature and memory. A final group of seventeen poems, entitled "Sometimes Quite Imitative," develops further Ross's own, paradoxical, aesthetic. These sonnets, among which are "The Nimble Fish," "The River Speaks," "Barbizon, France," and "The Lover Plaineth the Absence of His Love," exemplify a way of conceptualizing reality that both seeks a vision of what moves beyond the surface of the words of a poem and confesses the limitations of an aesthetic perspective.

Like archaeologists who dig up remnants of the past in the hopes of finding material to help them develop their present understanding of human history and experience, Ross, in his Sonnets, pokes among the ruins of a past aesthetic for elements to help him to do two things. Searching elements of an older aesthetic, Ross wants to tap into the creative sources of early poetry rather than recycle the petrified conventions prevailing in much of the Canadian poetry of his day. Further, like the Modernists who engaged with the Metaphysical poets or the medieval troubadours, Ross--had he been able find them--might have found features from the prosody of the past with which he could have generated a new kind of poetry and created new perceptions of the relationship between words and reality. In a letter to Ralph Gustafson, Ross writes that the sonnets "were written mostly as exercises, really" (1 October 1956; Whiteman No 38) and were based, he told Smith, "on a study of ancient prosody" (20 March 1950; Darling 94). In a moment, this chapter will look at a sonnet by Albert Durrant Watson (1859-1926), a Toronto astronomer who produced several works of poetry and verses for Methodist and Presbyterian hymnals, and another by Getrude MacGregor Moffatt (1884-1923), who studied at McMaster University and whose poems were gathered after her death. Both poems represent elements of the strain of Romanticism against which Canadian Modernism emerged but, first, we should ask why Ross uses the classical benchmarks he found in that study.

At the risk of overgeneralizing, it may be argued that poets from Petrarch to Seamus Heaney (b. 1939) use elements of ancient prosody as a means by which to break from the influence of their immediate precursors who have set the prevailing standards and dominant conventions of literature. Writers of the Renaissance, for example, employed classical literary traditions to step out from under the weight of the medieval accomplishment, in the process developing new ideas about individual subjectivity and appropriate poetic matter, and colouring their work with the authoritative hues of an ancient genealogy. Augustan poets used classical traditions as one might navigate a row boat, looking to past benchmarks as a means of arriving at orderly forms, decorum, and tasteful subject matter. Romantic poets, such as Keats and Shelley caught classical breezes in their revolutionary imaginations, using them to power their reconceptualisation of external reality. Classical forms and myths, transplanted from Aristotelian and neoclassical aesthetics of representation, aestheticised Nature as a screen on which to project what Wordsworth, in his preface to Lyrical Ballads (1800), called "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (25). As they did for Nietzsche's poets in Human, All Too Human (1878), for such transitional Modernists as Yeats and Pratt, and for central figures of Modernism, such as Pound, Eliot, and H. D., classical myths "procure for the present new colours through a light which they direct upon it from the past" (Hollingdale 125).

Ross employs classical forms of Petrarchan and Spenserian sonnets to investigate possibilities for a new aesthetic. In "Lampman and the Death of the Sonnet" (1976), Louis Dudek claims that at "the present moment" the literary tradition of the sonnet "is quite dead." It died in the hands of Lampman; if more recent poets had attempted to resurrect the form, then "it only came up to a sitting position--and lay down again in their pages of pure homage to the form" (41). The continuing, creative use of the sonnet by such diverse twentieth-century poets as W. H. Auden (1907-73), John Berryman (1914-72), Gwendolyn Brooks (b. 1917), Robert Frost (1874-1963), Seamus Heaney, Geoffrey Hill (b. 1932), Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950), John Crowe Ransom (1888-1974), and Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) undermines Dudek's claim about what he calls the "hypertrophy," or deadly overgrowth of the form. Contemporaries of Ross also made use of traditional poetic forms. The quality of Smith's "Archer" (1937; 1943) for example, and Klein's "XXII Sonnets" (1931), Livesay's "Sonnet for Ontario" and "September Morning" (1932), and Scott's "Sonnet" (1926) suggest that the sonnet's death was prematurely announced. Nor was the use of classical myths been extinguished. Smith's "Adolescence of Leda" (1963) for example, reworks classical myths while his "Prothalamium" alludes to classical forms and concepts.

Even if the sonnet was not completely dead in Ross's day, there were nevertheless sick patients. Two in the 1926 edition of John Garvin's Anthology, Canadian Poets, provide random examples of a version of an aesthetic that had generated the lively sonnets of the British Romantics or the Canadian Confederation Poets. Watson's poem, "God and Man," fuses Christian platitudes with abstract visions of the natural environment. The octave describes God; the sestet, man. "God is eternity, the sky, the sea," writes Watson, "The consciousness of universal space, / The source of energy and living grace." Human beings are atoms in an eternal universe:

> A light that twinkles in a distant star,
> A wave of ocean surging on the shore,
> Or substance with the sea; a wing to soar
> Forever onward to the peaks afar;
> A soul to love, a mind to learn God's plan,
> A child of the eternal--such is man. (9-14)

In the octave of her sonnet, "The Pine," Moffatt presents a tree silhouetted against the twilight sky; in the sestet, it becomes a figure for God's desire

> to lift a lowly flower
> To be the symbol of some glorious hour;
> Or to call in a shepherd from his hill,
> To be a king; or to exalt this pine
> Against the sky, minaret-like, and fine. (10-14)

These poems move with an enthusiastic Romantic vision of the individual placed on a cosmic stage. They fuse passion, high-mindedness, and spirituality according to the formula of the magazines and books found in middle-class households. There is an overflow of emotion in these poems, but it is too contained to appear spontaneous. The images are excessively idealistic, as in Watson's "child of the eternal," or too much out of place, as in Moffatt's vision of a minaret in an officially Christian Canada prior to the immigration of Muslims in noticeable numbers.

Ross's Sonnets formulate an aesthetic at odds with a late version of Romanticism. Like his contemporaries in the McGill movement, Ross draws on classical myths, but whereas the Confederation Poets prolonged Romanticism with this practice, Ross and his modernist contemporaries aimed to effect a break with it and its lifeless imitations, such as the poems of Watson and Moffatt. The third section of Laconics includes such poems as "Aurora," "Ariane," "Lethe," and a longer poem, "Death of Orpheus." Commenting on this section, Kizuk argues that "Ross works with the stock mythical subjects of the decadent era" but adds that he does so "differently from the way MacInnes, MacDonald or Pickthall might have done." Ross recovers figures from classical mythology, he adds, "not for the sake of literary reverie but as a test for the strength of his methodological attitudes towards truth in poetry" (Kizuk 43). The explicitness and simplicity of what Moore calls Ross's scientific "method of attaining originality by way of veracity" ("Experienced" 281) is part of the aesthetic experiment in Sonnets; he takes hold of, and steps aside from, such figures as Pan and Prometheus.

"On Mythical Beauty," the title piece of the third group of Sonnets, exemplifies of Ross's use of the conventions of the sonnet to engage with classical myths:

> O all this beauty shall not remain obscured.
> The older myths in which it is contained
> Shall still reveal themselves; their form regained
> Becoming ever clearer, not immured
> Within the darkness that has long endured,
> Nor shall the tension of a moment strained
> Lose what the centuries have still retained,
> What ages, though destructive, have assured.
> Pure rays of sunlight from an earlier day
> Will gently nurse forth shoots, tender at first,
> Then stronger, from the illimitable soil,
> Fecund, of the human spirit; in new ways
> Will issue newer energies, to burst
> Forth from their hiding place after much toil.

The octave suggests that the concept of beauty has been obscured by destructive history. Ross's sonnets propose that we may reconceptualize that concept, not by looking to the uses Western culture has made of ancient myths, but by returning to the myths themselves. Ross's sestet suggests that the glimpses of beauty caught in ancient myths become the mulch that provides the human spirit with new energy. For Ross, classical myths serve aesthetically, as they had for his precursors, to renew the imagination and enable the development of new poetic practices.

Paradoxically, in Ross's vision the myths themselves are of limited value. In "Golden Apollo," the god is represented through the instruments of ancient songs and ritual. "Bright-beaming with radiance clear and fine / As are the rays of sunlight sweet and strong," they enchanted "all the watchers" who "marvel at the sight" (12-14). As other sonnets make clear, however, the temples are closed and Ross's generation has no direct access to the splendour ancient worshippers saw in Apollo. The myths and poetic sources of the past die like the sweet sounds in "The Pipes of Pan."

The three poems that open Ross's collection, "On the Cessation of Oracles," catalogue what is not accessible to poets in the twentieth century. The first summarizes Ross's view of the futility of the wistful longing for the myths of another time exemplified in the longing of such early Modernists as the Aesthetes and Decadents, and in that of twentieth-century Romantic epigones.

> "The well is dry and ceased the babbling water" [sic]
> From spring into sunlight at the source;
> Gone is the trail of that mysterious force,
> No priestess telling what the god has taught her.
> No smoke ascends from sacrificial altar;
> The land deserted has denied its nurse;
> There are no ceremonies to rehearse,
> And time has put this place to pitiless slaughter.
> The attendant nymphs have vanished with the rest.
> The god's prophetic mantle is no more.
> No Pythia, contorted on the seat,
> Strives for an utterance as long before.
> The oracle is ceased, no longer blest;
> The wreckage of the temple is complete.

Poets, like the speaker in this sonnet, may desire a "speech melodious from minds /

Attuned to beauty that was never lost," or yearn for the aesthetic of the past; they succeed, however, only in fantasizing about the archipelagoes in "Islands of Song" which possess a "deceiving smile" (12). Sonnets is a declaration that the aesthetic vision of Ross's precursors has become illusory and unattainable.

Shelley had imagined his own idyllic island in "Lines Written Among the Euganean Hills" (1819), a topographical poem in which he expresses the idea that poetry educates not the human mind but the human soul. It is not surprising, therefore, that in his great lyrical drama, Prometheus Unbound (1820), Shelley reconfigures the rebellious Prometheus of classical myth as "the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends" (981). Shelley's Romantic aesthetic accords poetry the role of passionately expressing the best qualities of human nature. His aesthetic makes it possible for him, in "A Defence of Poetry" (written in 1821 but published in 1840), to claim for poets the role of "unacknowledged legislators of the world"; they are mediums who discover "those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered" and "the future in the present" (1086; 1073). Shelley was following Byron's own use of Prometheus as a heroic moral figure. In Byron's "Prometheus" (1816), the mythical figure becomes an aesthetic one that expresses both a human desire to endure tyranny and suffering ("His wretchedness, and his resistance") and a vital human spirit ("Triumphant where it dares defy, / And making death a victory" [796]). Mary Shelley's vision of a "modern Prometheus" in her novel Frankenstein (1818; 1831) was more critical; she used the classical myth to emphasize not "the purest and the truest motives," but human hubris in a world obsessed with science and the apparently unlimited potential of technology.

While Byron and both Shelleys placed the figure of Prometheus within an aesthetic that carries a moral burden, Ross makes a statement about the need for, and possibilities of, a new kind of aesthetic. In her review of Sonnets, Moore cites in full only one of the poems, "Prometheus--2" ("Modern" 114); its rhythms, language, and images make it one of the better pieces in the collection. Ross's Prometheus, "bound in adamantine chains / To the grim rock stark-lifting from the sea" (1-2), is not Byron's tortured figure of heroic resistance. Instead, resigned to "some increase to his pains," with eyes "growing dim," and "Discouraged," this Prometheus "relaxed the effort vain / Of rude rebellion" (8-11). In "Prometheus--1," Ross's figure, like Shelley's poets, can "pierce the future with prophetic sight" (11), but that future promises neither his freedom nor the overthrow of the tyrannical Zeus. What is promised instead is Nietzsche's "twilight of the gods"; Prometheus proclaims that Zeus will be "forced down to Night" (14).

Ross's vision of the twilight of a past aesthetic opens a way for a new engagement with the beauty that had illuminated ancient prosody. Although Prometheus can envision the downfall of Zeus, the golden Apollo "Never can disappear into a cloud" ("Golden Apollo" 1). His music is a "celestial fire," and his beauty an "empyreal light" (3, 11). The eternal quality of beauty may be reincarnated but only in a new aesthetic; the old aesthetic is lost.

VII

Ross was a scientist with a degree in chemistry; he was also interested in the spiritualism of the 1920s. As James McClenon has defined it in the Encyclopedia of Religion and Society (1998), spiritualism is a "[r]eligious and social movement based on the belief that it is possible to communicate with the deceased after their bodily death" (492). Fraudulent mediums and practices like table-tipping attracted much negative publicity but the genuine practice of spiritualism includes paranormal phenomena that have prompted numerous scientific investigations. American Spiritualism was a nineteenth-century movement which began in 1848 but continued into the twentieth century (492). Spiritualism, according to Robert S. Ellwood, in his article, "Occult Movements in America" (1988), experienced some revival in the 1870s, 1920s, and again in the 1960s. Ellwood also points out that its adherents included advocates of abolition, women's rights, and utopian economic reform (716). What "free verse" was to twentieth-century poetry, spiritualism was to twentieth-century religion. The practices of its mediums, Ellwood argues, represent a combination of the Swedenborgian understanding of spirits and Mesmer's states of consciousness. Spiritualism was an open, experimental movement and, like Pentecostalism, it was an "American spiritual export" (716). It is intriguing that Ross, who experiments with new forms of prosody associated with innovative writers and calls for a "North American" aesthetic, should have been interested in a religious movement that experimented with new practices, attracted a variety of progressive or radical people, and was an indigenous North American expression.

"Because of my fundamental beliefs and experience," Ross told Smith in a letter in 1950, spiritualism and dreams were "naturally prominent in all my work for many years." He admitted that some of his "experience and studies have been unusual and their product must naturally be looked at askance by the majority." Nevertheless, he adds, "I have decided to stick by what is evidently my real trend though I realize it leads me away from rather than towards publication" (20 March 1950; Darling 95). Not only was Ross prepared to run counter to majority opinion with his interest in spiritualism, but also he was determined, as he writes in another letter to Smith a few years later, to avoid confusion of his use of the word "spiritual" with traditional religious ideas. "Spiritual," he tells Smith in 1958, "is a word that has broadened out, or down, from its original significance," a significance, he says, he first understood from Paul's polarized definition in Romans: "For if the Gentiles have been made partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister unto them in carnal things" (Rom. 15:27). "The Greek pneumatikos," Ross continues, "meant 'belonging to breath or wind' or 'of the spirit.'" What concerns him, however, is that the word, "unfortunately, tends to connote the ecclesiastical, churchliness, etc." Wanting to avoid such connotations, Ross tells Smith that he was thinking of replacing "spiritual" in some of his sonnets with the word "spirit" (28 January 1958; Darling 121).

The main theme of his poems, Ross writes to Gustafson in 1947, "cannot be acceptable at the present time since, roughly speaking, it embraces much that is anathema in an age of enlightenment." According to Ellwood, spiritualists were often interested in North American shamanism (716). "I am," Ross tells Gustafson, "much closer, mentally, to the medicine man than to Diderot" (22 July 1947; Whiteman No 28); a scientist, he seems, nevertheless, to have thought he had more in common with non-rational visions of the world than with the instrumental rationality of the 1920s, a period of economic and technological development in Canada and the United States. Ross's sonnets question a Canadian Romantic aesthetic and its use of classical myths. Recurring motifs of dreams and death and the image of the poets as a medium create, in the language of spiritualism, metaphors for a poetry that rejects poetry like that of Watson or Moffat and moves towards the paradox of an aesthetic that locates the spirit of an eternal beauty in its own finite and fragmentary perceptions.

Dreams exercising their influence on the unconscious provide some of the vocabulary for Ross's aesthetic. "On Mythical Beauty" postulates a "darkness that has long endured" and "Pure rays of sunlight from an earlier day" (5, 9). The "older myths" (2) and the beauty they contain, crossing the borders of time as light that enters a realm of darkness in which they "nurse forth shoots" which will later "burst / Forth from their hiding place" (13-14). "Dream-Way," which begins the second group of poems in Sonnets, imagines a "country of dreams" as a transitional zone between the dark water of death and higher regions into which souls migrate:

> It may be that the country of a dream
> Illuminated, or remaining dim or dark,
> Resembles that low shore where souls embark
> Into the zone where shades and shadows teem;
> With no more than a momentary gleam
> From higher spheres. (1-6)

Inhabiting zones between light and darkness, and between the conscious mind and the unconscious, dreams erase boundaries between life and death, and they make what is known less secure in the presence of an irrational knowledge. They parallel "The zone of difficulty in the mind" in "To the English Language--2," through which old refrains of English poetry cross to "The inner cell of recollection" (7, 8).

Ross wrote to Smith that he had read the work of Freud and others on dreams (20 March 1950; Darling 95). In the Interpretation of Dreams (1900), the first English translation of which appeared in 1913, Freud employed the concept of language as a metaphor for the operations of dreams. Dream thoughts, or the latent meaning of a dream and its psychological purpose, and "the manifest content of dreams," writes Freud,

> are presented to us like two versions of the same subject-matter in two different languages. Or, more properly, the dream-content seems like a transcript of the dream-thoughts into another mode of expression, whose characters and syntactic laws it is our business to discover by comparing the original and the translation. The dream-content, on the other hand, is expressed as it were in a pictographic script, the characters of which have to be transposed individually into the language of the dream-thoughts. (381)

If language can serve as a metaphor for what dreams do, then dreams can function as a metaphor for language and, in particular, aesthetic language. "Dreams," argues Freud, "are psychical acts of as much significance as any others"; their significance lies in their motives, which are "in every instance a wish seeking fulfilment" (681). The image of a throng of angels in a "zone ethereal" in "On the Supernatural" (18), and the fantasy of "Island of Songs," exemplify a desire to recover a "speech melodious from minds / Attuned to beauty that was never lost" (5-6), or the yearning for an access in "On Mythical Beauty" to that beauty hidden in ancient myths. They are the contents of dreamlike environments. In "The Lake," the figure of a stranger lured by a perilous cold lake, who is "seen in youthful glory diving, / Then chilled and dead in water beautiful" (13-14), contains none of the elegiac reality of Milton's "Lycidas" or the surrealistic Modernism of Layton's "breathless swimmer" in "The Cold Green Element" (1955).

At least since William Langland's dream vision, Piers Plowman (1372-79), dreams have figured in literature in English, but what is interesting about Ross's use of dreams in some of his sonnets and the creation of a dreamlike atmosphere in others is that they are not allegories or metaphors for experiences which that can be described through other modes of discourse, such as theology, ethics, or psychology. They are, instead, the vocabulary of what Ross would call a few poems published in Poetry in 1934, "irrealistic verses." Their dream states exemplify a wish for a new way to apprehend the nature of human experience. They are "irrealistic" glimpses of reality that lie beyond the premodernist representational aesthetic, Canadian Romanticism, or the scientific discourses of geophysicists or psychoanalysts.

In "Dream-Way," the dream is death's brother. Although in the transitional zone "all surroundings threatening, ominous seem," souls who "embark into the zone" will soon learn that the dream "merges into death" (15). Death is a recurring figure in Ross's poems. It haunts "On the Cessation of the Oracles"; it is the goal of seductive music in "The Pipes of Pan," and the cause of unknowable responses of land and sea when Sappho commits suicide. The figure of death expresses aspects of reality or experience he does not think can be glimpsed except aesthetically. Its finality is a metaphor for the limits of rational perception and moral discourse. That all modes of perception are finite, unable to contain the whole of reality, frightens us. The presence of what we cannot comprehend endangers our concepts of what we already know; therefore, Ross's figure, as in "To Death," for example, "frightens fearfully / Hinting we shall be held long underground" (13-14). It stalks us in "By the River" or, as the "Chiefest of mummers and masked mysteries," on "the stage of humankind" ("To Death" 1-2).

As the myth of Persephone reminds us, though, to "be held long underground" is not to be held there forever. In "The Call," Ross takes us to a spiritualist séance in which a group of people watch and call on the dead. They wait for an answer to come from "the gathering places of the gloom" which are "Not sinister, but comforting." It is an image of Spiritualism's confidence that communications between the living and dead are possible: "The dead are gone, and yet the dead return," the speaker chants; "There's no finality in a funeral" (20). The sonnet reflects the interest Ross had in spiritualism; it also provides a metaphor for his aesthetic. In the dream-like atmosphere of the séance, the watchers discover, as do the migrant souls in "Dream-Way," that the boundaries between the dream state and wakefulness, between life and death, are blurred. In his sonnets, Ross juxtaposes images of dreams and séances with those of death; his paradoxical aesthetic places alternatives of the poets' imagination in apposition to an awareness of the limited quality of aesthetic perception. In the lexicon of spiritualism, death establishes a zone between the living and those from whom it has separated them, but an "irrealistic" communication proves possible across that zone. Like a séance, poems enable a vision of elements of reality that lie beyond the concepts our discourses permit us. As Freud's interpretation of dreams led to an understanding of their apparent absurdities, Ross's poems tentatively suggest that his aestheticised spiritualism may open up a path to the solution of "lasting mysteries" (15); Sonnets imagines that it may be possible to create a new kind of aesthetic by which we may perceive what we cannot conceptualize through rational and ethical modes of discourse.

Ross's sonnets are not propaganda on behalf of the spiritualism movement. Rather, metaphors drawn from spiritualism become his contribution to the aesthetic of Modernism or what Waugh describes as a "proliferation of value." They express a particular way of knowing the world and our experience of it, an aesthetic that is, as Smith puts it in "Wanted--Canadian Criticism," conscious of "its position in time" (601). Ross's unorthodox spiritualism provides a vocabulary for an aesthetic that is a way, to borrow Waugh's words, of viewing modernity. An aesthetic engagement with the world, she argues, seeks "new possibilities for creatively shaping or inhabiting our human environment and of renegotiating the boundaries of identity in ways which, without necessitating total abandonment of Enlightenment thought, may release us from the hidden tyrannies of universalising modes and their invisible exclusionary tactics" (8). As a geophysicist, Ross is a direct heir of Enlightenment thought. He is also a poet whose prosody functions like a spiritualist medium summoning the spirits from another zone, invoking the spirits of Petrarch's sonnets, Imagism, Impressionism, and Cubism, not in order to create an other-worldly vision, but to aestheticise the mundane realities of urban and rural life in twentieth-century North America. This mundaneness is exemplified in his poems by descriptions of the Ontario wilderness and images of fishing, swimming, sawing logs, reading classical myths, riding a train, watching the traffic move between skyscrapers, and writing poetry. Ross's is an aesthetic that seeks to break the tyranny of an exhausted version of Romanticism. Reading "large gobs of Roberts and others," Ross says in a letter to Gustafson,

> is like trying to swallow a mass of feathers from a slit pillow. [. . .] Isn't Lampman's "Life and Nature" (Oh, Life! Oh, Life!) simply one of the silliest pieces ever written, if you examine it closely--and all because he either didn't like organ music or happened to run into some bad organists ("moaning shrill")? And "The Piper of Arll" has always been one of my

> pet aversions." (19 August 1959; Whiteman No 51)

The world cannot be contained in conventional poetic measures; a new prosody is required. Paradoxically, however, exact words and the creation of sensory descriptions are the only means by which irreducible, elusive perceptions of the world may be conceptualized (or sought and glimpsed).

Ross's images of dreams and death do not offer a systematic approach to discerning beauty, or aesthetic truth; instead, they offer new perceptions, not of a mystical world, but of the reality we experience. Like the archaeologist digging up the remnants of the past, or like those who used fragments of Greek and Roman buildings to build their barns or shore up their cottages, his poems sift through his memories of the Ontario landscape and the ruins of older aesthetic practices for elements he can use to express a new kind of poetry and reconceptualize the relationship between words and reality. Rituals performed in an "ancient church," which, in "The Pythagorean Basilica," has been unearthed from "beneath the street" (1), have been forgotten and the vitality of Romanticism has disappeared, leaving only ruins, as in MacDonald's Flagon of Beauty, for example, or the sonnets of Watson and Moffat, and many of the poems in The Canadian Mercury. Drawn from his experiences of rural and urban life, and of spiritualism, Ross's images become figures that describe a new process of imaginatively knowing the world. "The Wise Men," the poem that closes his explicitly spiritualist group of sonnets, presents a glimpse of Babylonian astronomers surveying "the passing sky" and "all the lore that they had often told / To one another"; they weave "curious lore" that leads them to a "newer wonder" (2, 5-6, 9, 13). Surveying ancient prosody and drawing on his reading of his contemporary poets, Ross weaves a paradoxical aesthetic in which reality eludes the reductionist discourse of geophysics and psychoanalysis, and of a marriage of an old prosody with the English Canadian nationalism of the 1920s. It is a reality as hostile as the cold water of "The Lake" and as much beyond poetry's grasp as the slippery rocks and weed fronds are beyond the diver. Ross's perceptions of the world and of our experiences of it are translated into images of fleeting impressions and tiny or fragmented objects. In "On the Supernatural," he writes that "[w]e love the natural," or that which we think is sufficiently expressed in our words where "human reason [is] seated on a throne, / Creator of kingdoms for itself alone" (6-7). He invites us to

affirm the supernatural
However doubtfully we have looked upon
Its bare existence in time that's gone,
For it is ever near and ever real;
As we shall find. (1-5)

Ross does not permit us to escape the world. From both his poems in The Dial and his Sonnets, a modernist aesthetic emerges that accords us glimpses of our experiences and relationships with reality. It creates knowledge of ourselves and our environment that eludes other modes of perception. This knowledge is hostile to our confidence that our concepts take us to the "bottom line" of understanding. His poems invite us, in perceiving these fleeting glimpses, to find in them the shapes and sounds of beauty.

CHAPTER 4

ROBERTS'S SECRET GARDEN: IN SEARCH OF AN ELUSIVE AESTHETIC

I have a garden in the city's grime
Where secretly my heart keeps summer-time.

Charles G. D. Roberts, "My Garden"

Noticing a renewed interest in the work of Pratt, Sandra Djwa asks about the extent to which he was "a modernist in his poetic practices" ("The 1920s" 55); her essay answers her own question by identifying Pratt as a "transitional modern" whose work bridges Romanticism and Modernism in Canadian poetry. To a similar question about Charles G. D. Roberts and, more specifically, the author of New York Nocturnes and Other Poems,[24] this chapter contends that Roberts is a belated Romantic who both contributes to the Romanticism that the Modernism of the McGill poets sought to displace, but who also anticipates Ross's paradoxical modernist aesthetic.

The garden, a meeting of nature and city, is an apt metaphor for Roberts's poetry between 1896 and 1927 in which we find both late Romanticism and a desire for something new. The first section of this chapter discusses "In the Night Watches" (1927), a poem that illustrates Roberts's desire for a new aesthetic. A brief review of critical approaches that generally dismiss New York Nocturnes will follow in a second section. These critical discussions suggest that the years 1896-1927 represent a period of decline in Roberts's poetry. His belated use of elements of Romanticism accounts for this decline, which, together with his struggle to push beyond Romanticism, will be the subject of a third section in this chapter.

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[24] All quotations from Roberts's poems rely on Desmond Pacey's critical edition of his poetry, The Collected Poems of Sir Charles G. D. Roberts (1985).

A fourth section will argue that, in their formal elements, the poems of New York Nocturnes exemplify a tension between a languishing but enervated strain of Romanticism and a desire for Modernism. Subsequent parts will discuss the significance of the volume's place in the tradition of literary cities, the nature of Roberts's ideal beauty, and the metaphor of his garden. A eighth part will conclude this discussion of New York Nocturnes; setting aside Roberts's success as a late Romantic poet, it will argue that the failure of his desire to break through into a modernist aesthetic anticipates Ross's paradoxical aesthetic.

I

To what extent is Roberts a Modernist in his poetry? Like Ross's poems, "An iron railway bridge" and "Impression of New York," verses by Roberts, such as "Brooklyn Bridge" (1899) and "On the Elevated Railway at 110th Street" (1898), delight in an urban landscape. "Monition" (1907) expresses a modernist sense of the fleeting quality of urban experience in a mutable world:

A faint wind, blowing from World's End,
        Made strange the city street.
A strange sound mingled in the fall
        Of the familiar feet.

Something unseen whirled with the leaves
        To tap on door and sill.
Something unknown went whispering by
        Even when the wind was still.

And men looked up with startled eyes
        And hurried on their way,
As if they had been called, and told
        How brief their day.

The sentiment anticipates Modernism's preoccupation with a changing world, but

Roberts personifies mutability. With such personification, together with indistinct details and cross-rhymed quatrains, the poem reflects formal qualities of much of the poetry of late Romanticism. Another of Roberts's poems, "In the Night Watches," however, moves towards Modernism in both its themes and its prosody:

When the little spent winds are at rest in the tamarack tree
In the still of the night,
And the moon in her waning is wan and misshapen,
And out on the lake
The loon floats in a glimmer of light,
And the solitude sleeps,--
Then I lie in my bunk wide awake.
And my long thoughts stab me with longing,
Alone in my shack by the marshes of lone Margaree.

Far, oh so far in the forests of silence they lie,
The lake and the marshes of lone Margaree,
And no man comes my way.
Of spruce logs my cabin is builded securely;
With slender spruce saplings its bark roof is battened down surely;
In its rafters the mice are at play,
With rustlings furtive and shy,
In the still of the night.

Awake, wide-eyed, I watch my window-square,
Pallid and grey.
(O Memory, pierce me not! O Longing, stab me not!
O ache of longing memory, pass me by, and spare,
And let me sleep!)
Once and again the loon cries from the lake.
Though no breath stirs

The ghostly tamaracks and the brooding firs,
Something as light as air leans on my door.

Is it an owl's wing brushes at my latch?
Are they of foxes, those light feet that creep
Outside, light as fall'n leaves
On the forest floor?
From the still lake I hear
A feeding trout rise to some small night fly.
The splash, how sharply clear!
Almost I see the wide, slow ripple circling to the shore.

The spent winds are at rest, But [sic] my heart, spent and faint, is unresting,
Long, long a stranger to peace. . .
O so Dear, O so Far, O so Unforgotten-in-dream,
Somewhere in the world, somewhere beyond reach of my questing.
Beyond seas, beyond years,
You will hear my heart in your sleep, and you will stir restlessly;
You will stir at the touch of my hand on your hair;
You will wake with a start,
With my voice in your ears
And an old, old ache at your heart,
(In the still of the night)
And your pillow wet with tears.

Thematically, "In the Night Watches" appears to be a Romantic poem. A solitary loon, furtive mice hidden in the rafters, and "brooding firs" create a world of nature that reflects the speaker's isolation. This isolation is temporarily resolved in the final stanza as the speaker thinks of his beloved "Beyond seas, beyond years" (39), and tenderly pictures her alone and missing him. The speaker is aware of his restlessness and isolation, and aware, too, that he is imagining his beloved's loneliness; his self-consciousness reflects a mental process by which the significance of the real implications of time and space are diminished. The speaker's conscious vision of his absent beloved may be read as a reflection of a desire as instinctual as "A feeding trout [rising] to some small night fly" (32). Or perhaps the poem expresses a Romantic concept that the separated couple are united precisely in their isolation and loneliness. There is also, however, a clear leap towards a modernist sensibility.

If Romanticism looks at the objective reality of nature and perceives reflections of human subjectivity, this poem looks at an individual's thoughts and sees in them not self-delusion but the ability of imagination to apprehend reality differently. "In the Night Watches" does not point to self-delusion, however; it aestheticises reality and human experience. The cabin's isolation underlines not the tranquil recollection of painful memories ("O ache of longing memory, pass me by and spare, / And let me sleep" [21]), but their transformation into a vision of the subjective nature of reality. Imagination is a process that includes synaesthesia, or the fusion of distinct sensory experiences into a new awareness. The speaker's restless night thoughts about himself and his surroundings in "the forests of silence" (10) enable him to transform the sound of a splash into a vision of a fish jumping out of the water and of the widening ripples that ensue. The speaker's thoughts widen further to transform his longing for his beloved into an image of her awareness of his significance:

> You will hear my heart in your sleep and you will stir restlessly;
> You will stir at the touch of my hand on your hair;
> You will wake with a start,
> With my voice in your ears
> And an old, old ache at your heart,
> (In the still of the night). (40-45)

In its final line, the poem shifts into a Romantic expression of emotion; the speaker envisions his beloved becoming aware that her pillow is "wet with tears" (46) However, "In the Night Watches" also represents an aesthetic that tries to step aside from and beyond Romanticism by reaching for a modernist perception of human mental processes;

beauty and truth are not to be found in nature, fantasy, or in a new understanding of reality, but in the process of reaching that understanding. Poetry becomes a means of reconstructing both the self in relation to the surrounding environment, and one's relationships with others.

Roberts's shift towards a modernist aesthetic in this poem is echoed by its formal qualities. The stanzas vary from eight lines to twelve. These lines, which also vary in length, are suggestive of free verse. They rehearse older conventions, however. In combination with other metres, they are lines primarily of anapestic trimeter and pentameter. This slow, sing-song rhythm is appropriate for a meditative poem. In the third stanza, like the piercing call of a loon or the sound of a breeze at the cabin door, memories disrupt the speaker's sleep:

> Once and again the loon cries from the lake
> Though no breath stirs
> The ghostly tamaracks and the brooding firs,
> Something as light as air leans on my door. (23-26)

The image is dulled by the ascription of emotions to the trees, but in the fourth stanza similar lines create a sharper and more imagist-like description of a natural scene free of didactic or pathetic comment:

> From the still lake I hear
> A feeding trout rise to some small night fly.
> The splash, how sharply clear!
> Almost I see the wide, slow ripple circling to the shore. (31-34)

The last line of this stanza illustrates another experimental quality in this poem. It is not the poet's subscription to convention that determines the length of the lines in this poem, but a desire to find, as Ross expresses in a letter to Smith, "the right form for the right content, fitting them together to produce something with a new dimension" (14 April 1944, Darling 82). In these four lines, the last one is lengthened as it forms the image of widening ripples. The image is complete within the longer line but that line also qualifies a larger image formed by all four lines:

Of spruce logs my cabin is builded securely;
With slender spruce saplings its bark roof is battened down surely;
In its rafters the mice are at play,
With rustlings furtive and shy,
In the still of the night. (13-17)

The line structure of the poem amplifies the activity it describes: "my long thoughts stab me with longing," the speaker says. As in free verse, form follows content; the poem's images are not fixed in predetermined metres.

Like his use of pathetic fallacy, Roberts's alliteration is a mark of his adherence to conventional prosody. Had he been asked to comment on this poem, Smith would probably have charged it with failing to suggest that Romanticism might be dying out. Smith's Modernism, however, is coloured by elements of Romanticism that linger in such poems of his as those that are published in The Canadian Mercury. Roberts's Romanticism is gently disrupted by experiments that suggest a search for a new aesthetic. In this poem, for example, alliteration underlines images established by experimental lines. The contrast between the sibilant sounds and the harder "b's" emphasizes a tension between resilient trees and a fixed roof. In the last line of the third stanza, with its image of the fish, three stressed words begin with an "s," and an accumulation of "r's" provides an auditory accompaniment to the image of expanding ripples. "In the Night Watches" is the work of a poet who keeps one hand on expressions of a late Romanticism while quietly reaching towards a modernist aesthetic with the other.

II

The New York Nocturnes, published in 1898,[25] has generally been overlooked in critical discussions. At the zenith of Roberts's career, James Cappon's studies, Roberts and the Influence of His Time (1905) and Charles G. D. Roberts (1925), and Archibald MacMechan's book, Headwaters of Canadian Literature (1924), establish a basic critical approach to Roberts's work when they argue that his achievement is represented in his descriptive poetry of the maritime environment. Taking up and developing their argument in his chapter on Roberts in Ten Canadian Poets (1958), Desmond Pacey also acknowledges the significance of Roberts's landscape poetry. In this context, the New York Nocturnes and Other Poems is "completely lacking in distinctiveness of thought or expression" (Pacey 53).

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[25] Eighteen of the poems were published earlier in periodicals, such as The Bookman, a monthly magazine of literature and criticism modelled after the British Bookman; the Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine which serialized Henry James and Jack London; The Chap Book, a Chicago-based magazine in which Carman and Yeats were also published; The Independent, a New York journal with Congregationalist roots and interested in such social issues, such as women's suffrage; Harper's Weekly, an influential, illustrated literary and political journal; Lippincott's Magazine, published in

Roy Daniells, in "Lampman and Roberts," a chapter in Klinck's Literary History of Canada (1965), also picks up Cappon's and MacMechan's argument and adds to it. Roberts's achievement, he argues, lies in a few of his descriptive poems and also in his ability to build a non-Canadian readership for Canadian poetry. Except for a passing reference to "The Solitary Woodsman" (1897), which is one of the "other poems" and not part of the main sequence, he overlooks the New York Nocturnes. As well, W. J. Keith, in his introduction to his edition, Selected Poetry and Critical Prose: Charles G. D. Roberts (1974), finds little of lasting significance in Roberts's poetry. Commenting on "The Iceberg" (1931), he suggests that, "Like his own iceberg [. . .], the mass of his enduring poetry will dwindle"; what may survive will be those poems that hold together the specific details of New Brunswick landscape with faith in a unity of the self, nature, and the transcendent (xxxv). The rest, including New York Nocturnes, will dissolve into an ocean of forgotten poetry.

While focussing their attention on Roberts's landscape poetry, Fred Cogswell, Robin Mathews, and David Jackel develop new lines of critical argument. "Charles G. D. Roberts" (1983), Cogswell's contribution to the poetry series of Canadian Writers and Their Works, investigates the principal ideas that inform Roberts's poetry and fiction.

Philadelphia with a national circulation and which published Oscar Wilde, Rudyard Kipling, and Hart Cane; and Munsey's, a popular New York magazine.

Roberts, he argues, was a mystical poet for whom "poetry was independent of the will in its origins" (216). Curiously, though, except for passing references to two poems in the sequence, "On the Elevated Railway at 110th Street" (1898) and "A Nocturne of Consecration" (1897), Cogswell overlooks the New York Nocturnes with its description of what might be called a poet's mystical quest for ideal beauty.

In his study, Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution (1978), Mathews labels Keith an "Oxbridgean," by which he means a kind of critic who considers Canadian literature belated and derivative, dependent largely on British writers. In Mathews's judgement, Roberts is a strong, Canadian landscape writer. Keith, he contends, renders Roberts a pale imitation of the English Romantics (49-50). His argument that Roberts made "the Canadian landscape habitable for the imagination" (60) arises from a reading of Roberts's landscape poems and historical romances; he makes no comment about the New York Nocturnes and the possibility that it is not only the Canadian landscape that Roberts makes habitable for the imagination. Like Mathews, Jackel is interested in what gives Roberts's poems their "Canadian content." His essay, "The National Voice in Robert's Poetry" (1984), contrasts the specific detail and clear imagery of Roberts's major works with the bombast and trite expression of his overtly patriotic verse (45) and sets his nationalism in the context of the intellectual climate of the day. In Jackel's judgement, Roberts was "a regional poet, never sufficiently conscious of how ill-at-ease (as poet and intellectual) he was outside his region" (50); Jackel does not ask whether the work of a Canadian émigré in New York sustains or contradicts this assessment.

In a critical environment in which Roberts is presented primarily as a landscape and regional poet, his New York Nocturnes receives even less attention than his embarrassing patriotic verse. An exception is D. M. R. Bentley's essay, "Half Passion and Half Prayer" (1984). Discussing the vision of the New York poems and their sequential structure, Bentley argues that New York Nocturnes cannot be dismissed as insignificant because these poems represent "Roberts's attempt to arrive at a vision of sanctified and eternal human love" that reconciles conflicting elements "in his own divided nature" (58). Bentley makes possible a new critical approach to this work by

Roberts, but that approach does not bear directly on the aesthetic exemplified by these poems and their relationship to Canadian Romanticism and Modernism.

According to both Pacey and Keith, the New York Nocturnes belongs to a period of decline and poetic inactivity that separates two productive periods in Roberts's development. Pacey's and Keith's views of the interval between 1895 and 1925 suggest that these were fallow years. During this time, Roberts lives in New York and London and travels in Europe, but he writes little poetry and what he does write discloses something less than a creative aesthetic. In other respects, however, this was a productive time. Roberts produces his History of Canada (1897) and several historical romances, including A Sister to Evangeline (1898), The Heart of the Ancient Wood (1900), and Barbara Ladd (1902). Another novel, Red Fox (1905), and three collections of short fiction, Earth's Enigmas (1896), The Kindred of the Wild (1902), and The Watchers of the Trails (1904), contribute to the Canadian invention of a new literary genre: modern animal stories. Many of the poems Roberts writes during these years were published in a variety of poetry magazines and then collected in The Book of the Native (1896), The Book of the Rose (1903), and two editions of Poems (1901; 1907). This poetry, for the most part, reflects a decaying strain of Romanticism. If, as Pacey and Keith argue, much of Roberts's poetry fails to deserve enduring attention, it is, nevertheless, important to understand the aesthetic of this poetry if we are to comprehend how New York Nocturnes represents a point of departure towards a new aesthetic.

III

Another of Roberts's poems, "Butterflies" (1896) follows the Romantic vision of finding reflections of a subjective perception in elements of an external natural environment; Roberts's "swarm of butterflies" (5), however, bears little resemblance to Wordsworth's field of golden daffodils. The first stanza finds a hazy, religious significance in a small summer scene. A thrush's song recalls a church bell-tower, while the appearance of butterflies, although they will not be identified until the second stanza, constitutes a prayer for healing from an unspecified wrong. In the second stanza, effusive emotion makes the butterflies a vague metaphor for the soul, or a poet's quest for ideal beauty:

Once in a garden, when the thrush's song,
    Pealing at morn, made holy all the air,
Till earth was healed of many an ancient wrong,
    And life appeared another name for prayer.

Rose suddenly a swarm of butterflies,
    On wings of white and gold and azure fire;
And one said, "These are flowers that seek the skies,
    Loosed by the spell of their supreme desire."

The poem's formal elements reflect a formulaic use of older elements of prosody. It consists of a pair of the crossed-rhymed, iambic pentameter quatrains. The rhymes are predictable (air/prayer, butterflies/skies, and fire/desire), while the language ("Pealing at morn"), word order ("made holy all the air"), and artificial rhythm ("many an ancient wrong") reflect an archaic poetic diction. In the end, this poem is not an emotional response to a new perception of nature, but a silly and anaemic articulation of an obscure ideal. "I wandered lonely as a cloud" (1804) exemplifies Wordsworth's process of tranquilly recalling emotion, but if this process creates a perception of the poet's own subjectivity it is as a result of his direct engagement with elements of nature. The presence of a speaking butterfly in the closing lines of Roberts's poem does not summarize a recollected experience; it turns the speaker into an eavesdropper and a gossip, and the poet into a poseur and versifier in contrast to the skilled poet of "Tantramar Revisited" (1883) and Songs of the Common Day and Ave (1893).

The decayed strain of Romanticism in Canadian poetry often included a facile nationalism; some of the poems Roberts produces in this interim period belong with what Smith would later call "maple fudge." The Native" (1901), for example, lacks the detail and thoughtful meditation of Roberts's New Brunswick poems. As in "Butterflies," the stanzas of "The Native" are quatrains with stale crossed rhymes. The poem reduces conventional prosody and vague elements of landscape to versification, effusive emotion, and a clichéd expression of national identity:

O rocks, O fir-tree brave,
O grass and sea!
Your strength is mine, and you
Endure with me. (29-32)

These lines that alternate between iambic tetrameter and iambic dimeter, a vague notion of strength (what strength do rocks, grass, and sea have in common?), and an undefined courage that is suggested by Roberts's ascription of bravery to a tree, epitomize the version of Romanticism that Canadian Modernism would challenge. During this middle period of his writing career, Roberts served in the First World War and some of the poetry of these years reflects his war experience. Roberts, however, was not a Canadian Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967). "Cambrai and Marne (1914-1918)" (1918) is a heroic narrative poem; "The Summons" (1919) describes a soldier's enlistment as a response of the soul to a call to participate in a clichéd, heroic world of banners and trumpets. "To Shakespeare, in 1916" (1918) enlists Shakespeare in the war against the attackers of the Lusitania, and parrots the archaic form of the second person pronoun:

And surely, too, thou art assured.
        Hark how that grim and gathering beat
Draws upwards from the ends of the earth, –
        The tramp, tramp, of thy kinsmen's feet. (13-16)

As John Caldwell Adams points out in his biography, Roberts participated in the suppression of the Irish Easter Rebellion in 1916 and worked in the Canadian War Records Office in London before serving as a press correspondent with the Canadian Corps in France (124-25). His war poems take seriously the painful and frightening realities of the war, but they do so by recycling, without innovative variations, conventional Romantic prosody and the stock themes of Romanticism: manly heroism, freedom, and death.

Another kind of poem is "Going Over: The Somme, 1917" (1918). Roberts employs lines of iambic hexameter, which are varied by the presence of other metres, in four three-line stanzas and a quatrain; this poem represents a creative engagement with conventional prosody rather than a tired expression of Romanticism. It describes a soldier's last thoughts as he leaps from the relative safety of the trench into deadly gunfire.

> A girl's voice in the night troubled my heart
> Across the roar of the guns, the crash of the shells,
> Low and soft as a sigh, clearly I heard it.
>
> Where was the broken parapet, crumbling about me?
> Where my shadowy comrades, crouching expectant?
> A girl's voice in the dark troubled my heart.
>
> A dream was the ooze of the trench, the wet clay slipping.
> A dream the sudden out-flare of the wide-flung Verys.
> I saw but a garden of lilacs, a-flower in the dusk.
>
> What was the sergeant saying?--I passed it along.--
>
> Did *I* pass it along? I was breathing the breath of the lilacs.
> For a girl's voice in the night troubled my heart.
>
> Over! How the mud sucks! Vomits red the barrage.
> But I am far off in the hush of a garden of lilacs.
> For a girl's voice in the night troubled my heart.
> Tender and soft as a sigh, clearly I heard it. (Roberts's emphasis)

In "Going Over," Roberts, a belated Romantic, tries to emerge from a dying aesthetic and reach for something new. The soldier is conscious of "the ooze of the trench" and "the wet clay slipping" (7) and other horrific details of his environment. It is, however, the voice of his absent beloved that distracts him. Linking him with her, the isolated speaker's imagination transforms realities of nocturnal warfare into a dream--or nightmare--and makes real, instead, a vision of a far-away garden. As he leaps from the trench, probably to his death, the soldier is neither deluded nor disillusioned. He is aware of his surroundings and situation; he knows that the voice he hears is that of his sergeant giving the order to "go over," and he is also conscious of his own thoughts and his responses to that order. "Did I pass it along? I was breathing the breath of the lilacs" (10-11). His is the experience of a decidedly modern alienation; he is aware not only that his body is caught in the mud under the flaring red light of the barrage, but also that his mind is somewhere else. The speaker's thoughts as he "goes over" take us over to a new perspective on the nature of reality. Roberts aestheticises a soldier's experience; the reality of war can be reduced neither to the self-evident observations that war is hell nor to an empty rhetoric of glory, King, country, and God. "Going Over" creates a post-Romantic glimpse into the experience of dissociation.

IV

The shift towards a modernist aesthetic in "Going Over" and "In the Night Watches" is anticipated and developed in New York Nocturnes. Lamson and Wolfe, a Boston firm, published the poems with generous spacing and bound them in a sensual cover of dark green tooled leather on which the title and Roberts's surname are printed in gilt. The format invites readers to a leisurely reading of a poet's quest through a dark night for true love and beauty, and it suggests a belated desire for a central role of poetry in society, the loss of which the Romantics feared and the Modernists mourned.

The poems are arranged in two groups, the second of which consists of fifteen pieces of landscape and meditative verse that include "When the Clover Blooms Again" (1897), "Marjory" (1897), "Ice" (1895), and the often anthologized and widely discussed "Solitary Woodsman." The first group, "New York Nocturnes," consists of seventeen poems, some of which recall elements of a rural setting, but all of which describe the speaker's experience in New York. Formally, this group reflects, as does the second group, premodernist conventions. Couplets and quatrains play with several rhyme patterns and are often arranged in ballad and hymn-like stanzas. These conventions do not seem, however, to have fully satisfied Roberts. "A Nocturne of Trysting" (1898) begins with a three-line stanza and concludes with another of four lines. These lines are irregular in length, but they generally employ iambs in combination with other metres. The first line of each stanza contains four stressed syllables and the third five, while the second and fourth are lines of iambic trimeter:

> So the long day is like a bud
> That aches with coming bliss,
> Till flowers in the light the wondrous night
> That brings me to thy kiss. (4-7)

This poem is not an example of modernist free verse, but it does anticipate Stringer's call by playing freely with the rhythm and length of each stanza. Like "In the Night Watches," "A Nocturne of Spiritual Love" (1898) evokes a speaker's desire for his absent beloved; the quatrains of this New York poem parallel the play, in "In the Night Watches," of lines that alternate between iambic hexameter and iambic dimeter:

> Sleep, sleep, imperious heart! Sleep, fair and undefiled!
> Sleep and be free.
> Come in your dreams at last, comrade and queen and child,
> At last to me. (1-4)

Roberts finally employs the strategies of free verse in "A Nocturne of Consecration," the poem (first published in The Independent in 1897) that closes New York Nocturnes. With its inverted word order ("Content you with the wonder of love" and "If more you should surprise" [78, 80]), and its emotionally charged but imprecise images ("the divine-houred summer stillness," "the sweet air," and "the wise earth" [4, 7, 24]), the poem parrots elements of late Romanticism. None of the eight stanzas, however, are of the same length; they vary from five lines in the closing stanza to seventeen in the preceding one. The length of the lines and the pattern of their rhymes vary as well. The fifth stanza, in which the earth answers the speaker's request for "a new word" from his beloved, exemplifies both Roberts's Romanticism and his flirtation with free verse:

> Said the wise earth--
> "She is not all my child.
> But the wild spirit that rules her heart-beats wild
> Is of diviner birth

And kin to the unknown light beyond my ken.
All I can give to her have I not given?
Strength to be glad, to suffer, and to know;
The sorcery that subdues the souls of men;
The beauty that is as the shadow of heaven;
The hunger of love
And unspeakable joy thereof.
And these are dear to her because of you.
You need no word of mine to make you wise
Who worship at his eyes
And find there life and love forever new!" (40-54)

If the formal elements of New York Nocturnes point, albeit tentatively, towards Modernism, the setting of these poems indicates more clearly Roberts's desire for a post-Romantic aesthetic. The speaker searches for his beloved in an urban environment. Elements of an idealized rural landscape in "The Idea" (1898) (the "moon-white woodland stillnesses / Enchanted by a bird" and "childhood daisy fields" [17-18, 23]) are recollected in an environment of paved streets, train stations, the impersonal relationships of crowds, and artificial lights. New York Nocturnes envisions a world that differs not only from that of the Tantramar marshes or the forest isolation of "The Solitary Woodsman" and "In the Night Watches," but also from the world of "Butterflies" and "The Native."

V

"Great things are done," wrote Blake in "The Rossetti Manuscript," "when Men & Mountains meet; / This is not done by Jostling in the Street" (1-2). The jostling in the streets of Roberts's New York provides the context for a meeting between his speaker and the figure of ideal beauty. The first poem of New York Nocturnes, "The Ideal," functions as the sequence's preface. Not only is it separated from the other poems by the table of contents, a title page, and an epigraph from Plutarch, but it also summarizes the search described in the rest of the poems. "Faint with the city's fume and stress" (5), when hope has become "a tide run low / Between dim shores of emptiness" (2-3), the speaker looks for his beloved and finds her at night. He does not turn to the landscape of New Brunswick to escape "the city's clamour," but carries out his quest in "the city's weary miles," among "city-wearied men" (25-26) that he carries out his quest. The tranquillity and peace he finds, however, can only be described in the language of a remembered rural landscape.

The urban world of New York Nocturnes is not a foretaste of the technological celebrations of Vorticism, which contributors to Blast will voice less than twenty years later, and it does not anticipate Eliot's critique of urban anomie in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917). Neither does it echo Lampman's apocalyptic vision in "The City at the End of Things" (1894) or Roberts's own brooding play of memory and rural landscape in "Tantramar Revisited." Instead, the speaker enters his city to look for a beauty which, like the woman's love in "At thy Voice my Heart" (1898), lifts his life "from the clod" as a lily lifts its head "toward God" (10-12). The paradox of an urban quest and rural memories transforms the city into a garden, a synthesis of the opposition between nature and the artifice of urban areas.

Roberts's idealized beauty is an aesthetic expression of a desire to escape from the weariness and mutability of human experience that he describes, in "At the Railway Station" (1898), as the "Mysteries of joy and woe" (4). Paradoxically, it satisfies an insatiable desire; flowers in a secluded city garden, and the "sweet night" (16) of "Nocturnes of the Honeysuckle" (1898), relieve the "anguish of a vain love" ("My Garden" [1898] 6). In "The Ideal," the figure of an elusive woman answers the desire of the speaker of New York Nocturnes when she touches his lips and the "fevered lids" of his eyes (11, 13); she empowers him to speak of the city and of his quest to find her. Like the traditional invocation of the Muse at the beginning of a poem, "The Ideal" is the preface to New York Nocturnes, but it announces the goal of aestheticising the urban experience, and it moves Roberts's sequence towards Modernism.

Bentley suggests that, functioning regeneratively in the context of an urban weariness, the woman underlines a polarity between nature and city. As a result, "The Ideal" announces the fundamental narrative of the New York Nocturnes: "The speaker's extrication of himself from the psychological snare of the city through the healing and consecrating offices of a love that renovates his 'city-wearied' self by permitting him to remember his pre-urban--which is to say, pre-fallen--self" (62; Bentley's emphasis). The image of the ideal beloved, however, does not so much underline a polarity between nature and the city as it transforms that polarization. The woman's presence brings together the speaker's memories of a rural childhood and his adult, urban experience. His thought of her brings him "A breath from childhood daisy fields," but his sense of her presence reminds him of his encounters with the city and its negative features. Roberts's figure of an ideal beauty serves a different function from that which Bentley proposes. She discloses a process through which Roberts aestheticises the chaos of the city through his expression of the speaker's immersion in, and detachment from, that chaos. The speaker does not extricate himself from the city; he abandons his quest for beauty and consoles himself by memories of the beauty he had known in the New Brunswick landscape. Although "The Ideal" does not embrace urban realities, rural realities can hold only the memories of a sense of beauty once known. Ultimately, in "New York Nocturnes," the poems in the first part of the volume, the figure of ideal beauty eludes the speaker. In his mind, he returns to the landscape of his childhood, but it is only in the city that he senses the presence of beauty now. Romanticism belongs to the past; Roberts's figure in "The Ideal" suggests, hesitantly but clearly, that a modern poetry will have to generate its perspectives on beauty from the stresses and transitory experiences of a changing world.

Roberts's city is a departure from other literary cities. The representation of negative human experience by images of cities and their streets is a literary tradition that reaches back, as John H. Johnston points out in The Poet and the City: A Study of Urban Perspectives (1984), to Juvenal's satires and Virgil's polarization of nature and civilization. This polarization presents poetic images and a moral language in which to juxtapose the phenomena of nature and emerging commercial and industrial societies (xvii). Johnston suggests that Wordsworth's description of London in The Prelude juxtaposes, in a stressful, changing urban landscape, the sensory data of experience with perceptions shaped by imagination (103-04). By contrast, Walt Whitman (1819-92) celebrates the American city in expansive, exuberant lines. A knife-grinder in "Sparkles from the Wheel" (Whitman 514), and "populous pavements" (3) are images of urban vitality.

As in New York Nocturnes, a lonely man wanders through city streets in "The City of Dreadful Night" (1894), a poem by James Thomson (1832-82). Thomson's city is "of Night," he writes, "perchance of Death, / But certainly of Night" (IV.7-8). It is a place without "morning's fragrant breath" where the sun "dissolveth in the daylight fair" (IV.3, 7). It is marked by a "deadly weariness of heart all day" and by recurrent dreams that leave the speaker unable to "Discern that dream from real life" (IV.10, 14):

> For life is but a dream whose shapes return,
> Some frequently, some seldom, some by night
> And some by day, some night and day: we learn,
> The while all change and many vanish quite,
> In their recurrence with recurrent changes
> A certain seeming order: where this ranges
> We count things real: such is memory's might. (IV.15-21)

Thomson's urban figure is not searching for his beloved; rather, he embodies despair and an awareness of a Yeatsian sense that there is no longer a centre, or fixed truth, on which to hold.

Roberts steps aside from these representations of the city. His city is a kaleidoscope of images and emotions. Nothing stands still. Shifting scenes contrast images of an urban environment with those of natural landscapes, and offer expressions of love in the language of prayer. The city is a site of confusion, fear, and weariness, but also of vigour and persistence in a quest for an ideal beauty. These contradictions do not make Roberts's city part of a tradition that polarizes a rejuvenating nature and a demonic, or dehumanizing, city; rather, it is in the energy and contradictions of an urban environment, that beauty is to be looked for and glimpsed.

Roberts continues a positive view of the city after his New York Nocturnes; "A Street Song at Night" (1899) celebrates an urban couple's love:

Here mid the hasting and eddying faces,
        Here in the whirl of the crowd,
Where the car lights flame and the windows glare
        And the night is white and loud. (260)

Roberts's New York is a place of lights, motion, and paradox. The lovers' solitude is deeper in "the throng"; "Not in the wilderness could [they] be / More wonderfully alone" than they are in the swirling energy and sensations of the city. Similarly, the solitude for which the speaker of New York Nocturnes yearns is not that of the "Solitary Woodsman," who is at home in a rural wilderness, but something to be sought out among the lights and cries of the city. The pavements he walks reflect not only misery, but also joy and vitality. The urban tumult does not drown out his love; it gives rise to it. As "In the Crowd" (1898) exemplifies, it is not in tranquil solitude but in a tumultuous environment that he senses his beloved's presence:

The street is full of lights and cries.
        The crowd but brings thee close to me.
I only hear thy low replies;
I only see thine eyes. (5-8)

Her presence is imagined, even mystical; shortly afterwards, however, the speaker finds her among the crying and radiant faces in "At the Railway Station." In the atmosphere of a "jarred, tumultuous air" and "endless haste and change," his fevered eyes meet hers "and Heaven opens" (9, 5, 23).

If the city is a site of life and energy, it is also a place of exile, not from the landscape of Tantramar but from a confident knowledge about the place of beauty. In a poem, such as "In the Solitude of the City" (1898), the lights and voices in the streets enfold the speaker in "the dark of sorrow" (6) and fear. The city of "The Ideal" is a place of "fume and stress" and of "clamour" (5, 15). In "Night in a Down-town Street" (1897), a deserted street becomes a "grim cañon" and a dry "iron channel" (13, 18); it turns the universe into a reflection of his desolation, underscoring the distance separating him from his beloved in the poem's final stanza.

The narrow heaven, the desolate moon
    Made wan with endless years,
Seem less immeasurably remote
    Than laughter, love, or tears. (21-24)

The experience of exile generates a new vision. A station of New York's subway is a high point for a modern topographical poem, "On the Elevated Railroad at 110th Street":

Above the hollow deep where lies
    The city's slumbering face,
Out, out across the night we swing,
    A meteor launched in space. (1-4)

The city becomes an aesthetic alternative to the natural lights of the night sky:

The dark above is sown with stars.
    The humming dark below
With sparkle of ten thousand lamps
    In endless row on row. (5-8)

Tension between the darkness and the city's lights surrounds the lovers neither with fear nor with the commercialized sensuality of a night on the town but with mystery:

Tall shadow towers with glimmering lights
    Stand sinister and grim
Where upper deep and lower deep
    Come darkly rim to rim.

Our souls have known the midnight awe
    Of mount, and plain, and sea;
But here the city's night enfolds
    A vaster mystery. (9-16)

The patter of conventional iambic tetrameter and cross-rhymed quatrains clearly signals the presence of a languishing strain of Romanticism in the twilight years of the nineteenth century, but the poem's declaration that the presence of a mystery vaster than human experience or understanding is not deeply interfused, to paraphrase Wordsworth's poem, "Tintern Abbey" (1798), in a rural landscape (96), but perceived in the turbulence of a modern city. Poets, from Wordsworth to Tennyson and Roberts, have written about experiences of the sublime on mountains, by the sea, or at estuary marshes. Like the lovers waiting for a train, Roberts catches a glimpse in New York Nocturnes of another kind of mystery. His poems offer a glimpse of the realities of modern human experience that cannot be expressed in the language of Romanticism itself.

VI

Roberts's speaker looks for his ideal beauty in the chaos of the city, and, there, he briefly encounters her, not in tranquil recollections of Tantramar. New York Nocturnes has its own precursors in Dante's visions of Beatrice, for example, or in the spiritual and psychological quest for the self in the Dark Night of the Soul (16th cent.) by St. John of Cross (1542-91), and in the dark night of a woman's quest for her beloved in The Song of Solomon of the Hebrew Bible. Its more immediate precursors include Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," in which an otherworldly lady who entraps a knight may be read as a figure for the consuming nature both of love and of poetry, and "The Blessed Damozel" (1850) in which D. G. Rossetti (1828-82) cloaks an idealized love with the religious language of Christianity. The idealized woman of Roberts's New York Nocturnes, as well as the poem's pervasive dreamlike and vaguely religious atmosphere, reflect a continuation of the late Romanticism of Rossetti and other Pre-Raphaelites rather than the poetry of Keats or the vision of Dante, but Roberts's aestheticisation of a modern urban environment pushes the poems not towards a Rossetti-like medievalism, but towards a modernist aesthetic in which the location of beauty is not an assumption but a question.

"When my arms wrap you round," declares Yeats in "He Remembers Forgotten Beauty," "I press / My heart upon the loveliness / That has long faded from the world" (Selected Poems 29). The poem is from The Wind Among the Reeds (1899), a volume that was published a year after New York Nocturnes. Its mood parallels that of Roberts's poems. Both poets express a desire for an ideal beauty in the Pre-Raphaelite language of yearning for a beauty that is absent in the contemporary world, and that creates a dramatic tension between the objects of the poets' quests and the worlds, and words, in which they make their search. Like the elusive beloved in Roberts's poems, a mysterious woman eludes a questing poet in Yeats's "Song of Wandering Aengus," another of the poems in The Wind Among the Reeds:

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun. (17-24)

Images from rural Ireland and Irish mythology and the nationalism of the Celtic Twilight express the idea of an elusive beauty, "long faded from the world."

It may be elusive, but it is a beauty that has not faded from the world of New York Nocturnes. Roberts's juxtaposition of urban and rural images expresses his desire for an alternative to late and decayed versions of the Romantic aesthetic. Beauty is not forgotten but located within the paradoxes of the city. As the speaker embraces his beloved in "In a City Room" (1898), it is not loveliness that fades from the world but the strife and sounds of the city itself:

O city night of noises and alarms,
    Your lights may flare, your cables clang and rush,
But in the sanctuary of my love's arms
    Your blinding tumult dies into a hush.

My doors are surged about with your unrest;
    Your plangent cares assail my realm of peace;
But when I come unto her quiet breast
    How suddenly your jar and clamour cease!

Then even remembrance of your strifes and pains
    Diminishes to a ghost of sorrows gone,
Remoter than a dream of last year's rains
    Gusty against my window in the dawn.

Roberts's speaker looks for his beloved and briefly meets with her in the chaos of the city and not in the recollections of "woodland stillnesses" or "childhood daisy fields." As the speaker recalls a rooming-house window, lines of iambic pentameter diminish the sounds of the city. The city, however, is not erased but transformed by the beloved's presence in that memory.

When the speaker becomes aware of his beloved's presence in another poem, it is in words that transform the urban realities into a dreamscape. In "Presence" (1898), dusk follows dawn, the hours of transition and uncertainty. Blue waves, birds, flowers, and laughing brooks create a stark contrast to the trains, skyscrapers, chaotic streets, and moving faces of the city:

Dawn like a lily lies upon the land
Since I have known the whiteness of your hand.
Dusk is more soft and more mysterious where
Breathes on my eyes the perfume of your hair.
Waves at your coming break in livelier blue;
And solemn woods are glad because of you,
Brooks of your laughter learn their liquid notes,
Birds to your voice attune their pleading throats
Fields to your feet grow smoother and more green;
And happy blossoms tell where you have been.

Perceiving the presence of his beloved, the speaker is not led to a pastoral setting; instead, he finds colour and sound. The woman is the source of aesthetic qualities that enable the speaker to imagine, even though he is in the city, orchard and ocean, and to envision what lies beyond his experience of darkness and loneliness.

New York Nocturnes continues the prosody of late Romanticism; it also begins to present a post-Romantic perspective on urban experience. The realities of both city and rural landscape do not become, in these poems, the basis for moral polarization or an expression of anomie. Although, in the final analysis, "Presence" lacks the sensory details and mystical reflections of Roberts's nature poems and becomes instead a pale version of the lily-festooned and white-bodied Pre-Raphaelite visions, it establishes a garden in Roberts's city. Cultivated in the juxtaposition of urban and rural images, this garden becomes the figure of an aesthetic for which Roberts searches, and which is not that of a late Romanticism.

VII

"My Garden" consists of eleven rhyming couplets, the iambic pentameter of which, together with their imagery and diction, rehearse the conventions of a premodernist aesthetic. The speaker's words, like his heart, beats with a rhythm that sings of nature's fullness, or "summer-time" (2). While workers "faint with heat" on unshaded city streets at noon, and "forget that ever woods were green" (7-9), lavender, roses, and honeysuckle flower in the moonlight and the speaker "keep[s] tryst" (16) by a fountain, awaiting the promised return of his beloved. It is an exquisite portrait of love among the ruins of Romanticism:

> I have a garden in the city's grime
> Where secretly my heart keeps summer-time;
>
> Where blow such airs of rapture on my eyes
> As those blest dreamers know in Paradise,
>
> Who after lives of longing come at last
> Where anguish of vain love is overpast.
>
> Where men forget that ever woods were green,
> The wonders of my garden are not seen.

Only at night the magic doors disclose
Its labyrinths of lavender and rose;

And honeysuckle, white beneath its moon,
Whispers me softly thou art coming soon;

And led by Love's white hand upon my wrist
Beside its glimmering fountains I keep tryst [sic].

O Love, this moving fragrance on my hair,--
Is it thy breath, or some enchanted air

From far, uncharted realms of mystery
Which I have dreamed of but shall never see?

O Love, this low, wild music in my ears,
Is the heart-beat of thy hopes and fears,

Or the faint cadence of some fairy song
On winds of boyhood memory blown along?

O Love, what poignant ecstasy is this
Upon my lips and eyes? Thy touch, --thy kiss.

The garden is not an idyllic scene in which the speaker extricates himself from the heat and toil of the city. Rather, it is an intersection where an urban environment meets the music of nature. The thought processes of the soldier in "Going Over" enable him to glimpse a garden as real as the battle around him, while those of the speaker of "In the Night Watches" displace the isolation of a forest cabin and of the space and time that separates him from his beloved. The apposition of the harsh realities of the city with the equally real, and equally urban, experience of a garden breeze in a summer evening generates a glimpse of the absent beloved.

The glimpse is almost not enough, however; the speaker voices his doubts about the significance or reality of his experience. Is his imagination in this garden shaped by childhood memories, the fantasies of the Celtic Twilight, or Pre-Raphaelite medievalism? The uncertainty voiced by these doubts foregrounds the delicacy and ephemeral quality of human experience; the glimpse is enough. Like Ross's poems, this poem's vision of the fragmented, passing nature of human experience is an aesthetic perspective on the nature of reality, a perspective missed by a decayed Romanticism's vague images and allusions to universal ideals of love, nature, or beauty. Like "Going Over" and "In the Night Watches," "My Garden" creates an imaginative process that seeks a new perspective on the nature of reality, and brings the reader into a relationship with that reality that is not accessible through instrumental reasoning or ethical discourse.

The relationship of urban citizens with nature was also reconfigured by New York's Central Park, a project begun in 1858 and completed in 1877, two decades before New York Nocturnes. The park's designer was the influential American landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903), whose vision was informed by Virgil's Georgics. Penelope Hobhouse, in her study Plants in Garden History (1992), points out that, in the second half of the nineteenth century, eighteenth-century designs dominated England and boulevards were being laid down in Paris. Olmsted, who was also a leading conservationist, "created pastoral scenes in city parks for the relief of the workers" (272). Central Park does not offer relief by taking people out of the city and into natural landscapes; rather, it brings those landscapes into the city. If nature is transformed aesthetically when arranged as a park, the city is equally transformed. It becomes what is constituted at the intersection of street and park, of permanent buildings and transitory flowers, and of flowing traffic and moving water in pools or fountains. Roberts's secret garden is a similar aesthetic transformation.

The garden is also the means by which, in his mind, the speaker leaves the city and looks to elements of a rural landscape for meaning. In the final poem, "A Nocturne of Consecration," the speaker addresses his beloved in her renewed absence. He is "Alone with dreams and memories" of her (3) and, although he speaks to her as though she were present, what he tells her consists of fragments from conversations with the earth and the sky. Bereft, the speaker finds consolation, not from the city's lights, but from the stars who adjure him to find meaning in the transitory quality of his experience:

> be wise.
> Content you with the wonder that lies
> Between her lips and underneath her eyes.
> If more you should surprise,
> What would be left to hope from Paradise? (77-81)

As the speaker turns for consolation to an idealized nature, Roberts returns to a premodernist polarization of an alienating city and a mystical, healing, natural world. Roberts's poem is reminiscent of his earlier poems and those of his Victorian near-contemporary, Tennyson. His speaker, in "A Nocturne of Consecration," however, begins his quest by undertaking a search for beauty among the changing scenes and motions of the city, and in the experiences of its contradictions; this search anticipates Ross's modernist aesthetic. Even as the final poem in this narrative sequence begins to play with free-verse experimentation, however, it returns to the desire of late Romanticism to place beauty in "other worlds" that neither fate nor time, nor the experience of change, will alter.

VIII

Roberts's acquiescence to a premodernist aesthetic in his poems set in an urban chaotic environment means that, unlike Pratt, he cannot be counted a transitional Modernist. New York Nocturnes perpetuates a tired version of Romanticism. Paradoxically, however, these poems anticipate an element of Ross's modernist aesthetic, namely, a consciousness that poetry cannot fix within its lines the transitory and fragmentary qualities of experience which those lines manage to glimpse. Ultimately, "A Nocturne of Consecration" is a confession that Roberts's aesthetic is inadequate and cannot express the perception of beauty for which he searches in New York Nocturnes; it is a confession, however, that anticipates a new aesthetic, one which Eliot tries to articulate in the fifth section of "Burnt Norton" (1936):

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes, break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still. (13-17)

The poems of New York Nocturnes are twilight poems, hovering in a moment of transition between a late Romantic aesthetic and early expressions of Modernism. The concept of the nocturne is an appropriate one from which to create the forms and expressions of these poems. A short, Romantic form of music, the nocturne suggests a night scene and is usually, but not always, quiet and meditative. As Maurice Brown points out in his contribution to The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (1980), the nocturne, although rooted in an eighteenth-century form, the Italian notturno, expresses "subjective and profound emotion" (258). Perhaps the greatest expressions of this form of Romanticism in music are the nocturnes of Frederick Chopin (1810-1849) who, using the piano to express a variety of emotions, developed the nocturne into a form displaying "a more dramatic intensity than their title would suggest" (258). Roberts's New York poems are set at night and are reflective pieces. Excitement, grief, and quiet reflection provide dramatic moments in his narrative of the quest for ideal beauty.

Formally, the nocturne is an appropriate musical model for Roberts's poems. In his contribution to an article on Chopin in the New Grove Dictionary of Music, Nicolas Temperley describes the musical texture of the nocturne. It "isolates a right-hand melody, allowing the fullest possible expression in its playing, while the left hand, assisted by the pedal, provides the entire rhythmic and harmonic background in broken chord accompaniments" (Hedley 301). New York Nocturnes parallels this contrast. Conventional prosody, together with the Pre-Raphaelite elements of an elusive female figure, an abundance of flowers, and religious language, are accompanied by some experimental prosody and images of an energetic urban environment. Roberts's nocturnes reflect, on the one hand, features of late Romanticism and, on the other, a desire for a post-Romantic aesthetic.

This is not Cogswell's argument, but his brief description of Roberts's attitude to the city does point to it:

> It is difficult to move from a settled domestic life among friends in a small town to vagabondia in a large city; in consequence, many of Roberts's poems towards the close of the nineteenth century reflect loneliness, alienation, and the pain of separation from a more rural world. Yet even here, Roberts did not wax indignant and rail at his unlucky lot as Lampman did in a similar situation in Ottawa. He is able to escape from city pressures in "Brooklyn Bridge" and "On the Elevated Railway at 110th Street" and to demonstrate in his beautiful poem "Monition" that even New York, like Francis Thompson's London, was "no strange land" to the receptive spirit. (215-16)

If New York Nocturnes is not, in genre, time, or place, Morley Callaghan's That Summer in Paris (1963) or John Glassco's Memoirs of Montparnasse (1970), or the modernist poetry of their Montreal and Toronto contemporaries, Smith, Scott, and Klein, these poems number among the precursors of these later works for they illustrate an aesthetic in which the search for beauty takes place in contradictory experiences of an urban environment. If attention to precise detail and imagery are the benchmark of poetry, critics are right to set the New York Nocturnes aside; these poems repeat vagaries of a decayed strain of Romanticism and use the flora of the Pre-Raphaelites rather than elements from the New Brunswick landscape. Because New York is not the Tantramar marshes and, because the city prompts a different set of emotions, Roberts's poems require another language or at least a dialogue of several voices, premodernist and modernist. Among these voices we hear not only the poet of "Tantramar Revisited" and "The Solitary Woodsman" but also the conflicting expressions of Romanticism and of a desire for a new aesthetic.

CHAPTER 5

"IT'S NOT THE WAY YOU THOUGHT IT WAS": PURDY'S AESTHETIC IN NORTH OF SUMMER

> You've never seen this country
>
> it's not the way you thought it was
>
> Al Purdy, "The Country of the Young"

At first glance, Purdy's poems seem to have little in common with those by Ross. Ross's work belongs, with that of his contemporaries in the McGill movement, to the beginnings of Canadian Modernism and its desire to excise from Canadian poetry the influence of late Romanticism. The formal elements of Purdy's poems, together with his colloquial speech and his iconoclastic satire and parody, place him closer to the experiments of poets who might well be described as transitional Postmodernists, the Beats and the Black Mountain poets,[26] but from whom he distanced himself, than to the impersonal and metaphysical Modernism of the McGill poets. His fragments of dialogue, rambling lines, broad scenes, and vital human figures, create a poetry that appears to be as distant from Ross's short, sparse lines, images of small objects, and spiritualist, Petrarchan sonnets as Whitman's poems are from those of Emily Dickinson (1830-86). Like Ross, however, Purdy is keenly aware of the mutability of reality and the transitory quality of human experience and, like that of Ross, his is a paradoxical modernist aesthetic; the truths created in his vision of the Arctic in North of Summer are limited, but that limitation holds out the promise of revised or amplified understanding. As Roberts's collection, New York Nocturnes, anticipates Ross's paradoxical aesthetic, Purdy's volume, North of Summer, develops it further.

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[26] The Beat movement was a group of American writers, centred in San Francisco and New York, who came to prominence in the 1950s and who influenced popular culture and the counter-cultural movement with their provocative attacks on the middle classes of North America and their bohemianism. Among its figures are Lawrence Ferlinghetti (b. 1920), Allen Ginsberg (1926-97), and Jack Kerouac (1922-69). The Black Mountain poets were another, but more philosophical, movement in the United States in

North of Summer is a sequence of poems that document Purdy's sojourn on Baffin Island in 1965. They describe the arctic landscape, the people he meets, and his self-consciousness as an outsider among the Inuit. It is a contribution to a long-standing Canadian tradition of poetry about the North. In his essay, "Tracing One Discontinuous Line through the Poetry of the Northwest Passage" (1996), MacLaren summarizes that tradition as it emerges through the paradoxical images of the North and the Northwest Passage in the journals and poetry of arctic explorers:

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the 1950s. Reflecting a diversity of style and interest, they were anti-academic and sought a poetry that, free from established conventions and a reliance on printed type, emerges spontaneously and reflects the natural rhythms of breathing. Among these poets are Robert Creeley (b. 1926), Robert Duncan (b. 1919), Denise Levertov (b. 1923), and, at the centre, Charles Olson (1910-70). Duncan and the ideas of the Black Mountain poets were significant influences in the founding and development of Tish (1961-69), a Vancouver-based group of Canadian poets that included Frank Davey (b. 1940), George Bowering (b. 1935), and Fred Wah (b. 1939).

> It is empty, desolate, and silent, yet lines have been drawn across it, lines full of promise--promise for spiritual rebirth, for technological innovation, for the realization of national, corporate, and personal desire; its illusiveness yielded a passage that is not much of a passage at all; there is an ocean, but it is frozen. It is the testing ground for and the graveyard of independence. (9)

Purdy's vision of the North in North of Summer departs from this tradition. Baffin Island is not an empty or particularly silent environment. For Purdy, the Inuit who live there are neither the invisible people overlooked by forces of economic and political development nor curious objects for anthropological study. Rather, the people he meets have their own history. In "Innuit [sic]" (1967), for example, Purdy catches a glimpse of "shadowy figures" from "the Dorset and pre-Dorset Cultures / 5,000 years ago" (l. 507) in the eyes of a soapstone carver in the Frobisher Bay co-op. It is also a painful history:

> the race-soul has drawn back
> drawn back
> from settlements and landing fields
> from white men
> into secret vaults
> and catacombs of marrow
> bone rooms
> that reveal nothing. (8-15)

Withdrawal and silence are not the only responses the Inuit make to an invading culture.

Purdy's travel guides and companions, like the figure in "Eskimo Hunter (New Style)" (1966), freely make use of elements of southern technology as they struggle with the elements of their own environment:

> In terylene shirt and suspenders
> sun glasses and binoculars
> Peterborough boat and Evinrude motor
> Remington rifle with telescope sight
> [he is] making hot tea on a Coleman stove
> scanning the sea and shore for anything
> that moves and lives and breathes. (1-7)

In Purdy's North, the indigenous people have lived much longer with the land than he and other outsiders have, and with a greater understanding that sometimes shows itself at his expense. Purdy develops his understanding of the Arctic and of himself as a wandering poet. His journey to Baffin Island is the occasion of his own development of the paradoxical aesthetic identifiable in Ross's northern sensibility and poetry.

Purdy travelled to Baffin Island with, as he recalls in his autobiography, Reaching for the Beaufort Sea (1993), a certain amount of bravado and with questions about his own abilities as a poet:

> [t]he Canadian Arctic was where I first took my ego in my hands and said to the Canada Council, I can write poems there. When you experience that blindingly white place of sunlight, vivid blue water and solitude that presses on you and surrounds you like air itself--you wonder at your own

> hubris and insolence in thinking that you can write about it. (262)

In hindsight, Purdy regarded the years 1965 and 1966 as "a demarcation or bench mark." What lay on one side of the bench mark were the years of what Purdy calls "an apprenticeship, an uncertain testing of my footing, a mysterious waiting period" (189), a period that includes the publication of Poems for All the Annettes (1962) and The Cariboo Horses (1965). His arctic travels feature centrally in this "bench mark" period, in part because Purdy understood his poems to mark a new departure in Canadian poetry. "No other poet I knew of," he argues in Reaching for the Beaufort Sea, "had ever gone to the Arctic (except Robert Service, and he didn't count)." Seemingly unaware of other poems about the North,[27] Purdy had read early exploration accounts, and, in the volume's third poem, "The North West Passage" (1966), he distinguishes his own journey from those of Sir Martin Frobisher (1539-94), James Cook (1728-79), and Sir John Franklin (1786-1847). In her essay, "The Ivory Thought" (1993), Lorraine York proposes that Purdy's vision of the North is that of "a huge, white narcissistic playground, passively offering up to us the image of own imposing selves" (48-49), but the world of North of Summer is full of colour and far from passive. In Purdy's view, there is a vast silence, not in the northern landscape but in Canadian poetry about the North. Until he writes his poems, it remains "virgin territory [. . .] untouched except for the mundane prose of explorers and scientists" (190). Purdy's encounter with its ancient landscape and indigenous people leads him to offer images of an intruding poet who, although often humiliated and frustrated, discovers that Arctic realities force him to reconsider his ideas and his approaches to writing poetry. The aesthetic that emerges in North of Summer is a process of simultaneously engaging with the people and landscape of the Canadian Arctic and distancing himself from them as an intruder. As the poems of Ross do with a more southerly version of the North (represented by northern Ontario), Purdy's poems generate an understanding of the Arctic that cannot be perceived through historical or scientific investigations. Further, although truth of the Arctic cannot be reduced to poems about it, it can be glimpsed through them. Like Ross's, Purdy's aesthetic is a paradoxical one.

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[27] Two articles by MacLaren, "The Poetry of The 'New Georgia Gazette' or 'Winter Chronicle'" (1992) and "Tracing One Discontinuous Line," discuss verses Thomas James (c1593-c1635) included in his book about his explorations in the Arctic, Strange and Dangerovs Voyage (1633), and the poetry published in the shipboard newspapers produced during the 1819-20 expedition led by Sir William Edward Parry (1790-1855). As MacLaren argues, it appears that, to Purdy, "the idea of explorer-poets seems as foreign as the idea of astronaut-poets" ("Tracing" 15). Purdy also ignores two poems by Ralph Gustafson (1909-95). In "On the Yukon Run" (1960), Gustafson juxtaposes the colours of a sunset viewed from the airplane in which he travels with thoughts about on-going gold mining; his sonnet, "In the Yukon" (1960) describes the northern landscape at ground level.

North of Summer consists of thirty-two poems that document Purdy's visit to Baffin Island.[28] Between the table of contents and a poetic foreword, or "Prelude Poem" (1966), eight colour plates reproduce paintings of Baffin Island by A. Y. Jackson (1882-1972), and serve as a visual preface to Purdy's collection. The volume concludes with a postscript that gives one account of its origin. Its title is taken from "Still Life in a Tent" (1967), a poem that describes a guided camping trip during which Purdy becomes ill and his "thoughts travel together / in fevered fantasy / North of summer" (ll. 63-65). He envisions himself travelling "with ham sandwich and thermos / to find the court of the Seal-King" (80-81). His delusions, fear, and disorientation are not symptoms of an inconvenient affliction but signposts of a poetic journey that generates a new understanding of what it means to be in the North:

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[28] Most of the poems were published in journals in 1966 and 1967. Fifteen of them were published in Beaver, Prism International, and The Tamarack Review, and five others in Canadian Literature and Evidence. Sixteen are reprinted in The Collected Poems of Al Purdy (1986).

> I'm so glad to be here
> with the chance that comes but once
> to any man in his lifetime
> to travel deep in himself
> to meet himself as a stranger
> at the northern end of the world. (94-99)

Purdy's vision of the Arctic is an aesthetic one; it creates a landscape shaped by the rhythms and images of poetry. In the lines from "Innuit" that are quoted above, for example, repetitions of "drawn back" and "from" emphasize the retreat withdrawal of aboriginal culture before white settlements. In those lines, and in the ones quoted earlier from "Eskimo Hunter" and "Still Life in a Tent," the predominantly iambic lines that are varied by the use of trochaic and anapestic substitutions undergird an apparently informal, colloquial conversation with a subtle, rhythmic structure. In this carefully crafted, poetic vision, knowledge of the Arctic is always circumscribed and results in the poet's self-consciousness. The result is not a tortuous or disingenuous deconstruction of knowledge but a celebration of the presence of aesthetic possibilities.

The first section of this chapter proposes that North of Summer represents a turning point in the development of Purdy's aesthetic vision. His vision of the North is a shift away from that of the first generation of Canadian Modernists. To highlight the uniqueness of Purdy's vision, section two discusses Scott's poems about the Mackenzie Delta and Smith's modernism as it is exemplified in three of his poems about trees. Purdy's own poem, "Trees at the Arctic Circle" (1967), is the subject of the third and final section, for in this poem can be seen the paradoxical aesthetic that Purdy shares with Ross and that he develops in his own way.

I

Purdy regarded North of Summer as a turning point in his development as a poet; it also represents a new way of looking at the North. In "The Turning Point" (1966), the poem that opens the collection, it is not the future of the land that is at stake but the poet's imagination and his ability to find an aesthetic vision of that land. His flight to Baffin Island is marked by a self-conscious misunderstanding of the North in literary and personal contexts. Suzanne, the flight attendant, points to the predawn light visible through the window and tells Purdy that, sometimes, she sees "angels out there." "Human angels?" he asks her and she laughs. "I must have said the wrong thing," he confesses (15-19). A Romantic vision of the North is not available to Purdy. Baffin Island is a name he has remembered "since childhood," but already he understands that it is "most unlike Cathay or Paradise," the Romantic Orientalism and other descriptions he recalls from books he used to read (36-41). It is also colder than he had anticipated: "I guess / the Arctic is no place for shirtsleeves" (19). However, fanciful images will not help him generate the truth of an environment he approaches as both a traveller and a poet. His perceptions of the hard realities of this environment, and of his own limitations, begins to shape his aesthetic struggle.

In Pangnirtung, a hamlet on Baffin Island about three hundred kilometres north of present-day Iqaluit (or Frobisher Bay, as it was called when Purdy visited it), Purdy begins his journey. "Eskimo Graveyard" (1967) is a good point of departure for a discussion of North of Summer because Purdy's peripatetic observations of the Arctic in this poem exemplify his aesthetic vision of the North. He begins his walk in the company of a "Public Works guy" (8), who takes him through the "glacial litter" of "an old river delta" (1) to a cemetery where "you always find good gravel for concrete" (9) and where Purdy sees the body of an old woman "wrapped in blankets / above ground" (13-14). Leaving behind the Public Works employee who stops to talk with the construction foreman, Purdy walks towards "the tents of The People" (35) and, later, to a point beyond the Inuit community, where he has a view of the headlands of the Pangnirtung Fjord. His perspectives on both the community and the landscape are self-consciously aesthetic; he gazes at the community in the distance as if it were a painting or a photograph. In "one corner of the picture" (37) that he constructs, he places images of pride and affection:

> Mothers with children on their backs
> in the clean white parkas
> they take such pride in
> buying groceries at H. B. C.

> boys lounging under the store
> in space where timber stilts
> hold it above the permafrost
> with two of them arm in arm
> in the manner of Eskimo friends. (38-46)

The image is painted by a sentence that rambles through nine iambic lines, much as Purdy rambles through the town site. Later, Purdy feels that "something ought to happen" (61) in another corner of his picture where the summer sun is "stretching / a yellow band across the water / from headland to black headland" (63-65). The internal rhyming of "band" and the repeated word, "headland," add a mellifluous note to descriptions of life in the community and of drama in the landscape.

The images, however, are coloured by his earlier moment in the graveyard; both scenes recall the dead woman lying above the frozen ground. The store under which boys are lounging stands above the permafrost. Purdy's scene appears natural, but it is also a reminder of the woman whose body, not yet interred, lies above the frozen ground in the cemetery. These boys, and mothers who are occupied with their own daily concerns, lead Purdy's mind "to think of the old woman / neither wholly among the dead / nor quite gone from the living" (49-51). He wonders "how often / a thought of hers enters the minds / of people she knew before" (52-54). Purdy had arrived at the cemetery from the river delta; with the evidence of enduring geological time behind him, he wonders if the transitory quality of human life can be countered by the memories of the living. Viewing the sun above the headlands, he thinks that "something" should take place; what does happen is that his mind shifts from the "yellow band" of sunlight stretched across the inlet to a sense that the settlement is sealed in "as if there was no way out" (68). His next thought is about "That old woman" (72); like the community, which is seemingly closed in by the sun on the horizon, or like the bodies buried in glacial gravel, human life is contained within the broader sweep of geological forces and time. Thinking of the woman, Purdy wonders "about human bookkeeping," or the "debits and credits" (75-76) that symbolize the relationship between memory and mutability, and between a transient visitor and his poetic observations. Recalling her, Purdy arrives at one more image:

> the sealed white tents
> like glowing swans
> hoping
> for a most improbable
> birth. (79-83)

"Eskimo Graveyard" is a deliberate expression of a modernist aesthetic. It generates an aesthetic truth about a poet's visit to the community that could not be apprehended through the instrumental reasoning of Public Works Canada, for example. The hope for an "improbable birth," which the swanlike tents evoke, suggests what the poet thinks should happen: the old woman in the cemetery should be reborn in the memories of the community. Purdy's image is also an expression of his desire to generate, through the poem's aesthetic construction of Pangnirtung's setting and people, a unique understanding of Canadian nature and life.

In poems such as "H. B. C. Post" (1967) and "At the Movies" (1966), Purdy criticizes white intrusion in the North. This criticism accompanies his attempts to understand aesthetically what he calls, in "The Turning Point," the "full shape of the Arctic" (20) as he imagines its inhabitants see it. In "Canso," for example (the title refers to a commercial airplane), he rewrites modern technology in the language of Inuit mythology. The plane, which "Swung by the heels like / Achilles" (1-2) of Western myth and epic, approaches an island known by ancient Dorset and Thule cultures, while a figure from aboriginal mythology, "Sedna / the mother of all sea mammals," waits below in the sea (20-21). Canadian development of the Arctic has its own Achilles heel; its strong presence is vulnerable not only to the challenges of a living, indigenous culture but also to a poet's aesthetic perception of the North and his own self-mockery as a representative of southern Canada. Purdy's self-consciousness precludes a literary form of colonialism, and the naive assumption that he understands the Inuit and can appropriate their perspectives on the world. As he walks through Pangnirtung and wonders how often the dead woman's own thought "enters the minds / of people she knew before" ("Eskimo Graveyard" 53), he also wonders how often "thoughts of [him] occur to the mosquitoes" (58-59); his poem gently laughs at both his presence on the island and at his thought processes. Purdy's self-mockery in "Eskimo Graveyard" expresses a paradoxical aesthetic. He is aware that the knowledge he creates of the Arctic is also limited.

This paradoxical aesthetic is reflected also in "When I Sat Down to Play the Piano" (1966). The laughter is less than gentle as the poem presents a moment when, squatting in "a quiet glade among great stones" (6), he finds himself surrounded by "a dozen dozen [sic] fierce Eskimo dogs / with an inexplicable [. . .] appetite / for human excrement" (24-25), while a child throws stones at the animals and laughs at him. The poem's euphemistic title and the hyperbole generated by "glade," a word that belongs to earlier pastoral poetry, contribute to the humour by which the poem undermines the poet's imposing self. "When I Sat Down to Play the Piano" pokes fun at a poet who, unlike the heroic Pierre in Scott's "Fort Smith," loses his dignity in his bodily struggles:

> I shriek
>   and shriek
>   (the kid laughs)
>   and hold onto my pants
>   sans dignity
>   sans intellect
>   [. . . . .]
>   and damn near sans anus. (40-47)

The joke is on the culture of southern Canada. Purdy employs iambic metre to describe his humiliation and the cadences of the Authorized Version of the Bible to aestheticise "the most natural of natural functions" (10):

> He cometh forth hurriedly from his tent
> and looketh for a quiet sequestered vale
> he carrieth a roll of violet toilet tissue
> and a forerunner goeth ahead to do him honour
> yclept a snotty-nosed Eskimo kid. (1-5)

His parody of Biblical prosody, especially that of Psalm 23, in combination with sarcastic references to the advice columns and heroic attorneys of popular culture ("Dear Ann Landers / what would you do? Dear Perry Mason / what would you do?" [27, 29]), criticises a southern culture that tries to invade the North. In the context of his contest with nature on Baffin Island, Purdy shouts that these traditions offer "NOT A DAMN THING" [sic] (32).

On Baffin Island, Purdy finds himself incapacitated on more than one occasion. He is caught in an awkward situation in "When I Sat Down to Play the Piano," and he is laid low with fever while on a camping trip in "Still Life in a Tent." Purdy's North is strong and resilient; it is not, as in it is Scott's poem, "Mackenzie River" (1963),[29] a "bleak" and "bare" landscape (33). The old woman in "Eskimo Graveyard" is laid to rest on top of the frozen ground, but willow bushes in "Trees at the Arctic Circle" send their roots down into the ground:

> about 2 feet under
> those roots must touch permafrost
> ice that remains ice forever
> and they use it for their nourishment
> use death to remain alive. (38-42)

In "Arctic Rhododendrons" (1967), the North is the location of an evanescent beauty whose death nourishes the memories of lovers:

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[29] Quotations of Scott's work rely on The Collected Poems of F. R. Scott (1982).

flowers were their conversation
and love the sound of a colour
that lasts two weeks in August
and then dies
except for the three or four
I pressed in a letter
and sent whispering to you. (20-27)

The poems that express Purdy's North create knowledge of the world he encounters and of himself. In Reaching, he claims that "there's a shadow self I'm trying to get in touch with, the other self who lives in all of us, friend, foe or neutral judge" (189). Purdy argues that human beings must "invent or discover" their own existence. He is offering here neither a Nietzschean will nor a contemporary conservative notion of the self-sufficiency of the individual. In the opening paragraphs of "Anecdotage," the final chapter in his autobiography, he argues that the "doppelganger of the soul," that other self he tries to get in touch with, "doesn't exist. Therefore I invent him" (189). Purdy's responsibility, then, is aesthetic. What emerges from his visit to Baffin Island is a self-conscious engagement with the world and his aesthetic transformation of it.

Like Romanticism, Waugh argues, Postmodernism is faced with the problem of "how to separate the object to be observed or studied from the critical discourse which in some sense constructs it" (12). Given her argument about its relationship to both Romanticism and Postmodernism, Modernism must also wrestle with this question. Purdy's answer is to laugh at himself and at his perceptions in his poems. The poet of

North of Summer is conscious of himself as an outsider in the northern landscapes and its communities, and about his struggles to understand "the full shape of the Arctic." His self-awareness becomes a conscious understanding of both the reality he perceives and the real nature of his poetry by which he constructs those perceptions. In his poems, Ross is acutely aware of the limited abilities of poetry to express the truths it perceives in a mutable world; when Purdy pokes fun at himself, he follows Ross's aesthetic even as he replaces Ross's gravity with his humour. He also takes it a little further. It is not the fleeting and fragmentary nature of the world, or the limited abilities of poetry to express them that Purdy points to, but the limitations of the poet himself. Purdy's paradox is that his self-conscious awareness of those limitations accords him the freedom to rewrite his poems and develop further his own aesthetic vision of the North and the act of writing poetry about it.

II

There are other traditions of writing about the Arctic; they cannot be charged with doing "not a damn thing" in their representations of the North, but they can be questioned. North of Summer, to paraphrase Roberts, takes hold of the aesthetic of an earlier generation of Canadian Modernists, and steps beyond it. Smith's first version of "The Lonely Land" (1926) was dedicated to the Group of Seven; it links the McGill movement with the innovative visions of early modernist painting in Canada. Purdy dedicates North of Summer to Scott. When McClelland and Stewart brought out the volume in 1967, it included reproductions of paintings that Jackson had done during his own trip to Baffin

Island, and which had appeared earlier in a number of the centennial year issues of the Hudson's Bay Company magazine, The Beaver. The North that Purdy's poems construct differs from the trees in Smith's earlier poems and from the North in Scott's poems, written in the 1950s and 1960s, about the Mackenzie Delta. The paragraphs that follow will explore some of these poems by Smith and Scott in order to better understand Purdy's unique vision of the North. This discussion begins with Purdy's response to Jackson's paintings, for it is a response that indicates Purdy's desire to move away from the aesthetic of the first generation of Modernism in Canadian poetry.

In a letter to Margaret Laurence (1926-87), Purdy writes that Jackson's paintings seem to turn his collection into "a sort of art book," which guarantees that McClelland, whom he does not like, "can't very well use anything but good paper" (2 February [1967]; Lennox 9).[30] He values the paintings not for their artistic qualities, but because their presence will improve the appearance, and sales, of North of Summer. In another letter to Laurence two months later, Purdy is less restrained in his opinion of Jackson's work. "I think they're terrible," he writes, "and Jackson is a study in retarded development" (20 April [1967]; Lennox 19-20). While Jackson may be alive "technically," he adds, his paintings suggest that "he passed to his last reward about 1920" (8 May [1967]; Lennox 24). Jackson was very much alive, however. The paintings to which Purdy takes exception resulted from his second visit to Baffin Island, a journey he made the same year that Purdy travelled there. Purdy's ad hominem attack notwithstanding, what emerges from his reaction to Jackson's paintings is a strong desire to break with the earlier modernist aesthetic (and an unpeopled North) that they exemplify.

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[30] References to Purdy's letters include the date of the letter and the page on which it may be found in Margaret Laurence--Al Purdy: A Friendship in Letters, edited by John Lennox, and in The Purdy-Woodcock Letters, edited by George Galt.

The Group of Seven's Modernism, as Charles Hill reminds us in The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation (1995), was a struggle to reconstruct a landscape that had been painted with premodernist European colours and subjects (20). At the same time that the McGill poets were engaging with Anglo-American Modernism, Jackson wanted Canadian painters and collectors to expose themselves to modernist art in order break the hold of established conventions in Canadian painting. In "Up North" (1927), for example, an account of his first visit to the Arctic that was published in The Canadian Forum, he suggests that Baffin Island offers the same opportunities for new developments in Canadian painting that Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) had found in the islands of the South Pacific (480). Two years later, in "The Royal Canadian Academy" (1929), which appeared in The Canadian Mercury, Jackson reviewed the Academy's fiftieth exhibition. He acknowledges that the painting world's equivalent to the Canadian Authors Association "does not discourage originality" and that the exhibition includes "bold and solidly painted things" that show "no lack of technical ability" or "liveliness." At the same time, however, he chastises the Academy. Its exhibition "encourages banality," and panders to the tastes of Canadian collectors who ignore contemporary French developments and who prefer, instead, "the obvious inanities" of Dutch painting while overlooking entirely the work of Vincent Van Gogh (1853-90) (54). Jackson, like Smith who dedicated "The Lonely Land" to the Group of Seven, belongs to the first wave of Modernism in Canada; he wants to create a new perspective on Canadian experience.

The figure of Jackson appears in "The Country of the Young" (1966), Purdy's conclusion to North of Summer. Alluding to Jackson's comments, the speaker in Purdy's poem points to the colours in Jackson's paintings of Baffin Island and says that "they're not bright Gauguin / or blazing Vincent" (ll. 16-17). Not only are the premodernist traditions of European art unsuitable to the scene on which Jackson and Purdy gaze, but so is the vision of the first Canadian Modernists. Ross wanted a poetry that reflected "something of the sharper tang of Canada"; Purdy's figure of Jackson takes up that theme. "You've never seen this country," he says, "it's not the way you thought it was[.] / Look again" (7-9). In his Sonnets, Ross had looked back to an earlier aesthetic, but, beyond the use of the Petrarchan form, he could not establish a continuity between it and one more suitable to modern Canadian experience. Purdy, by contrast, finds both continuity and dissociation with an earlier aesthetic. He sets Jackson within his own poem, and he has him speak words that redefine modernist aesthetics even as he creates the paintings Purdy dislikes. The figure of Jackson serves as a metaphor for Purdy's own identification with earlier attempts to create a new understanding of Canadian experience while also moving away from it.

Scott looks at Canada's North and creates two aesthetic visions of it. One is a world we glimpse in "Mackenzie River" which is "so bleak and bare" that "a single plume of smoke" becomes "a scroll of history" (33-36). It belongs "wholly to itself / obeying its own laws" (1-3). Like the melting glacier that, in "Old Song," flows over granite, the Mackenzie River carves into the "stone bed" and flows over "sunken rock"

("Mackenzie River" 10-11). The landscape in "Fort Smith" (1956) is a world on "the edge of the [Canadian] Shield"; it is "polished by ice" and echoes "the roar of the great rapids" (54-56). This poem creates an image of the North from sparse descriptions and hard images in stanzas with groups of three, successively indented lines that suggest both the river's meandering and poems by Williams, the great modernist champion of poetry's contact with local detail. Like a cubist canvas, Scott's river might be described as an image created at the intersection of several planes, those of fluid motion and solid rock, of sea and of fertile deltas:

> The top water   calm
>   moves purposefully
>   to a cold sea
>
> Underneath   its stone bed
>   shows sunken rock
>   in swirl and surface wave
>
> Suspended
>   in its liquid force
>   is the soil of deltas.

In its images and formal elements, "Mackenzie River" exemplifies the aesthetic Scott announces in "Old Song" when he evokes a hard, ancient landscape as the embodiment of a spirit in which he wants to ground a modern Canadian poetry.

"Mackenzie River" is also a dialogue between aesthetic representations of the world and its history. Scott's vast Arctic where a solitary plume of smoke becomes an event is the land of "A river so Canadian / it turns its back / on America" (28-30); Scott's second vision is a political one. The North is a tabula rasa, an empty slate written over by a southern-directed economic development. In its contention with that development, the bleak, silent landscape is transformed into realizable potential. Scott's North is

> An arena
> Large as Europe
> Silent
> Waiting the contest.
>
> Underground
> In the coins of rock
> Cities sleep like seeds. (15-21)

The contest is of epic proportions, and Scott's poems contain lists that, like those in epic poetry, characterize a moment in history by assembling object after object and description after description. A description of cargo ferried to Fort Smith by a Slave River barge in "The Camp at Bell Rock" (1956) exemplifies the invasion of northern Canada by southern technology, economic desires, and political bureaucracy:

> Muckers for mines, acids for ores,
> Barrels of oil and gas, timber and pipe,
> Bull-dozers and cranes, fork-lifts and drills,

> Tough hardware, and the fuel of power.
> Under tarpaulins are boxes of fruit,
> Tinned vegetables, baby-food and oranges,
> And one big flashy fire-truck,
> Like a huge toy, red and hosy [sic],
> With siren, axes and nozzles,
> A civic triumph for the new Aklavik
> On the Delta, location E3. (44-54)

These elements, not those of the landscape in "Old Song," or the Precambrian Shield, "speak the language of life" (43) in "Canada's colony," as Scott refers to the North in "Fort Smith" (20). The latter poem is a satirical vision of development in the Northwest Territories. Along the town's streets, which are unnamed except for "Axe-handle Road," are outposts of southern life:

> There was the Bank of Commerce
> In a new tar-paper bunk-house
> Opened six days ago,
> The Hudson's Bay Store and Hotel,
> Government Offices, Liquor Store,
> RCMP Headquarters, Catholic Hospital,
> Anglican and Catholic Churches,
> The Imperial Oil Compound
> The Barber Shop and Pool Room,

A weedy golf course, the Curling Club,
And the Uranium Restaurant, full of young people
Playing song-hits on the juke-box.

This list is as poetic as the Yellow Pages, but its bitter humour constitutes its aesthetic value. "Fort Smith" points to a truth that lies beyond the commercialism of the growing town and the empty lives of its inhabitants. Fort Smith is a town in which the Precambrian landscape and aboriginal people are marginalised, but not without irony. Although the original inhabitants live in what others call "the native quarter," on the lawns of the "trim houses of the civil servants" are "tents for children to play Indian in" (35, 39-41). Like "The Canadian Authors Meet" (1927) and "W. L. M. K." (1954), "Fort Smith" is a poem in which aesthetic knowledge illustrates political commentary.

So, too, is "A New City: E3" (1956; 1970), a town alluded to in "The Camp at Bell Rock." A poetic presentation of the opening of a new territorial council in Inuvik is full of irony. Native people who had watched "The slow, inescapable death / Of this land" (2-4) and an American invasion of "the tundra and lakes" also watch the construction of the town, "a bureaucrat's dream" (16), but they are not present for the opening ceremonies (30). In a contest with human development, the natural forces of the North have gained a small victory. The whites-only gathering proceeds without a symbolic parliamentary mace which had been lost among the thriving muskrats of the river delta and in the mud the official had tried to escape by building Inuvik across from it "upon solid rock" (12-14, 41-45).

It is in the ancient landscape outside the growing towns, not in the streets and institutions that signal economic and political development, that a northern beauty can be found. The speaker of "Fort Smith" becomes aware of this beauty when he witnesses his companion in a contest with the Slave River:

> Pierre, suddenly challenged,
> Stripped and walked into the rapids,
> Firming his feet against rock,
> Standing white, in white water,
> Leaning south up the current
> To stem the downward rush,
> A man testing his strength
> Against the strength of his country.

Scott's North is a vast, primordial landscape that becomes a testing ground for Canadian development. It is an aesthetic construction that seconds a socialist vision; the northern environment is the scene of economic development and social criticism.

Purdy's aesthetic vision of the Arctic shares some points of reference with Scott's earlier Mackenzie Delta poems. His observations of the Hudson's Bay Company trader in "H. B. C. Post" and his epic-like list of elements of modern, southern technology in "Eskimo Hunter," for example, parallel Scott's descriptions of technological and economic activity in the Western Arctic. Although Scott expresses his concern about the deleterious impact of northern development, he also views the North as a landscape full of possibilities for Canada's development. Purdy is more sceptical. While in Frobisher Bay, he writes to George Woodcock expressing his concerns about the impact of southern culture on the North. "Eskimos are being changed over," he says, "to beings like us"; contact means the Inuit are being remade as "a bad facsimile of white men" (13 July [1965]; Galt 5).

"H. B. C. Post" illustrates Purdy's concern. Hunters bring their sealskins and furs to a post manager who "explains the reasons behind his price" and "picks out a fault here and another there" (21). Although this economic and cultural exchange "ends with acceptance" (22), the poem does not conclude with an acceptance of commercial culture exemplified by the Hudson's Bay Company:

> [. . .] in the Eskimo's mind I have seen
> clothes for the whole family,
> new rifles with telescopic sights,
> 100 pound sacks of flour and groceries,
> shining marine engines, clean white tents,
> stacked up dream-high in his mind
> come tumbling down-- (24-29)

Scott struggles poetically to understand the contest between a hard, ancient land and twentieth-century development; Purdy contends with himself. Purdy's challenge is not that of Pierre in Scott's "Fort Smith" who pits "his strength / Against the strength" of the river. Nor is his North a testing ground in which, like early explorers, he will try to prove his ability to endure against a harsh and bleak landscape. North of Summer will prove to be a turning point in Purdy's development as a poet. His aesthetic vision emerges in his struggle to understand what he glimpses as the "full shape of the Arctic," a world into which he arrives not as a developer but as an interloper. Purdy's dedication of North of Summer to Scott points to a sense of continuity with his poetry. Like Scott, Purdy wants to look again at northern Canada; he wants, however, to see it in a different way.

Published the same year as North of Summer, Smith's Poems New and Collected contains a sequence of three poems about trees. In "Historied Trees" (1994), Bentley suggests that Smith tries to neutralize a Canadian Romantic tradition regarding the landscape by questioning the idea that nature has something to "say" (10). The first of Smith's three poems, "Birches at Drummond Point," is a brief, imagist lyric that tries to clear away other literary trees. Against a tradition exemplified in poems by Carman and his contemporary, F. J. Sherman (1871-1926), for example, in which birch trees symbolize beauty and represent the idea of art's immortality, the trees in Smith's poem "are birches and 'nothing more'" (10). Uncomplicated colours ("white," "green") and bare adjectives ("slim," "dark") create a simple set of images of trees curved in the wind, their leaves rustling. With a few, terse verbs ("glints," "flashing," "makes"), Smith's stark description underscores a modernist apposition of direct presentations of natural objects with the aesthetic gaze of the poet: "What do they say?" Smith asks (14). Smith's sparse punctuation frees the words to move in the rhythms of lines and images and it permits a terse description of the scene ("Leaning over the lake / slim white birches/ curved by the south-west wind" [1-3]) while line breaks and indentations set up a reading in which the poem questions itself. Twice in the short poem, in the fifth and final lines, three words--"or seem to"--are set off from the rest of the poem. As Bentley suggests, Smith's poem questions the idea that nature has a message for the human intruder. The poet's aesthetic vision does not identify a truth that inheres in the natural world; rather, it creates it. "Birches at Drummond Point" questions the continuation of Romantic visions of Canadian landscape and exemplifies a modernist aesthetic that is self-consciously anxious about its possibilities to interpret the world.

Smith follows "Birches at Drummond Point" with "Tree" (1948), a revision of an earlier poem. It suggests that the language of poetry represents reality denotatively.

> Words are ciphers
> denoting speeds and directions
> not of thought only
> but of things. (1-4)

The next stanza, however, claims for language a power of divine proportions, for here the word is spoken and immediately a world is created.

> I say tree
> and the rain falls
> and the sun gets to work
> and the seed breaks
> and the sprout appears. (5-9)

Polysyndeton, the repeated use of the co-ordination conjunction "and," echoes the poetry of the opening chapter of Genesis. In Smith's poem, the word "tree" doubly reconstructs the world; it "split[s] the earth" with an aged tree, "gray, black, knotted, gnarled" and presents "a boy / carving a heart / and a name" (13-17). In "Birches at Drummond Point," poetry cannot discern what nature says; in "Tree," poetry engages with the natural world and inscribes its meaning on it.

The third poem in the sequence is Smith's 1929 version of "The Lonely Land." A modernist economy reflected in short lines and sparse description produces a prospect poem that echoes impressionist art or the paintings of Emily Carr (1871-1945) in which a foregrounded tree is surrounded by swirling clouds, hills, and trees:

> Cedar and jagged fir
> uplift sharp barbs
> against the gray
> and cloud-piled sky;
> and in the bay
> blown spume and windrift
> and thin, bitter spray
> snap
> at the whirling sky;
> and the pine trees lean one way. (1-11)

With its terse description (the verb "snap" has its own line and "are lost" another) and its verbs of motion ("whirling," "stagger and fall, / and recover"), "Lonely Land" shares the aesthetic landscape with other poems of the day. It is similar to H. D.'s "Oread" (1924):

> Whirl up, sea--
> whirl your pointed pines,
> on our rocks,
> hurl your green over us,

cover us with your pools of fir.

Smith's poem reflects the influence of H. D.'s and, in its turn, seems to influence "Island with Trees" (1928), a poem Ross includes in Laconics:

The trees are bent
away from the north
on this island
in the lake
wind-swept
in all the seasons--
the northern wind
is master here. (1-8)

As in H. D.'s and Ross's poems, nature in "The Lonely Land" contains no inherent truth. Rather, the poem's images create a knowledge of the landscape that endows it with beauty:

This is a beauty
of dissonance,
this resonance,
of stony strand,
this smoke cry
curled over a black pine
like a broken
and wind-battered branch. (23-30)

Scott's "single plume of smoke" in "a land so bleak and bare" echoes Smith's "smoke cry" the a wind-swept landscape. Smith's smoke is not cabin smoke, however; it is a more complicated image constructed through synaesthesia; sound is conveyed through the visual imagery. The duck's cry, a metaphor for loneliness, curls like smoke and, it may be envisioned, with the colours of smoke, over a black pine. Scott's smoke unfolds like "a scroll of history," but Smith's cry is another kind of text. It is not an emblem of the potential development of Canada; it is a sensual evocation of the beauty Smith perceives in the Canadian landscape. Dissonance and resonance are constituted in the contrast between, on the one hand, a transitory duck and moving wind and water, and, on the other, the tenacity of the leaning pines. Smith's vision of pine trees and a wind that "curdles the sky / from the north" is not a response to changes taking place in urban, and urbane, centres in Britain and the United States; it expresses, instead, the "sharper tang" of a Canadian modernist aesthetic. H. D.'s poem reflects the experimental ideas of Imagism in its attempt to reduce its representation of realty to things themselves, an attempt that creates a complex meeting of the subjectivity of the poet with that of the reader. Ross's and Smith's trees are aesthetic objects presented in an objective manner, or what Bentley describes as neutrality.

III

By claiming that the "full shape of the Arctic" was unrepresented in Canadian poetry until his journey to Baffin Island, Purdy rejects earlier, southern constructs of the North. His poems in North of Summer avoid becoming another such construct, in part because they are written in the Arctic and are shaped by Purdy's encounters with a northern landscape and its people. More importantly, North of Summer is not so much a poetic representation of the realities of Arctic Canada viewed by another southern intruder as it is a reflection of the intrusion of the North into Purdy's aesthetic processes. When Purdy returns from Baffin Island to his home in Ameliasburg, Ontario, thoughts of the people he met enter his perceptions of his own world. "Odd things happen," he writes in "Prelude Poem," the epigraph to North of Summer. "Brown men in mukluks climb / the snake fences" along the rural roads and he is afraid "to mention it / at the village store" (1-4, 6-8). In "The Country of the Young," the volume's closing poem, Purdy's figure of Jackson tells him that the North is "not the way you thought it was"; Purdy's epigraph announces that the country around Ameliasburg is also no longer what he thought it was. North of Summer does not only document his arctic journey; it also describes the aesthetic process that emerges from the journey. Purdy's poetry generates a new understanding of the Inuit and their environment, and also of his world.

"Trees at the Arctic Circle" exemplifies Purdy's paradoxical modernist aesthetic. He begins by expressing contempt for bushes that struggle to grow in the harsh environment north of the tree line.

> They are 18 inches long
> or even less
> crawling under rocks
> grovelling among the lichens
> bending and curling to escape

making themselves small
finding new ways to hide
Coward trees
I am angry to see them
like this
not proud of what they are
bowing to weather instead
careful of themselves
worried about the sky
afraid of exposing their limbs
like a Victorian married couple. (1-16)

Purdy's thought does not ramble without hindrance; lines of iambic tetrameter interrupt his sentences, creating fragmentary expressions of ideas that pile upon one another. In the structure of these lines, Purdy carefully expresses the problem he recognizes that he has in understanding the North, or the willow bushes that represent it. His perspective is not yet shaped by direct observation of the arctic landscape itself, but by images he has brought with him from the South and from an older aesthetic vision of the Canadian environment, a world of Douglas Firs, maple trees, and "oaks like gods in autumn gold" (17-19). Looking again at the bushes, however, he makes a reassessment. He no longer finds cowardice and Victorian sensibility reflected in their growth, but a hard courage, which he expresses in complete, although unpunctuated, sentences:

> their seed pods glow
> like delicate grey earrings
> their leaves are veined and intricate
> like tiny parkas
> They have about three months
> to ensure the species does not die
> and that's how they spend their time
> unbothered by any human opinion. (27-34)

What begins as fragmented descriptions of arctic vegetation becomes a mellifluous meditation on the thought processes that generate his poems.

Purdy then decides that, in his initial response to the landscape, he had been "stupid" (53):

> I see that I've been carried away
> in my scorn of the dwarf trees
> most foolish in my judgement.
> To take away the dignity
> of any living thing
> even tho it cannot understand
> the scornful words
> is to make like itself trivial
> and yourself the Pontifex Maximus
> of nullity. (43-52)

He had failed to understand the "shape of the Arctic" and to see in it something other than the preconceived images through which he trivialized the landscape. Consequently, he recognizes, it is not the North that is diminished but himself as a poet. The trees continue their struggle for survival without a thought of him and, through his poem, he himself, and not the Arctic, becomes that emptiness attributed to the North by southern images; he becomes a high priest of "nullity."

His failed attempts to comprehend the Arctic--what he calls his "stupidities"--are anticipated in "The North West Passage" and generate uneasiness in "At the Movies." While waiting for his plane to leave for Baffin Island, Purdy contemplates the difficulty of finding "anything more to say" about the North. The Northwest Passage has been a metaphor for all that we want to know about the Arctic, but it is, after all, "found / [and] needs no more searching" ("North West Passage" 1-2). He fantasizes about the attempts of the explorers to find the Northwest Passage:

> I amuse myself with the idea of
>   Martin Frobisher
> "Admiral of the Ocean-Sea" who was
> "hurte. . .in the Buttocke with an Arrowe"
> running down the beach near here
> to escape the blood-mad Skraelings hoping
> to reach Mrs. Frobisher in time for tea. (9-14)

The hyperbole of this image ridicules historical explorations, but it also prepares us for his sardonic comments about his own attempts to "find," or comprehend, the North:

> I'll think of something
>
> maybe
>
> a break-thro
>
> to strawberries and ice cream for dinner. (68-71)

In 1576, as Purdy reminds us, Frobisher did not make it home for tea. In view of the poem's last lines, the implication, metaphorically, is that, in 1965, neither might Purdy. Like Frobisher and other explorers who imposed their own preconceptions on the North and, as a result, failed to find in it the resources that might have enabled them to survive there rather than perish, Purdy takes with him into the Arctic his own preconceptions of aesthetics and of the Arctic. Purdy has made himself familiar with Western literary traditions, as he has with the explorers' journals; his perceptions of the sailor-explorers who died in the Arctic are shaped by careful allusions to Fury, Ariadne's thread, and the Minotaur (19, 24, 28), for example. Looking at the North through these lenses, Purdy fears, he may loose his aesthetic bearings by seeing only what he thought is there and not the way the country really is.

In "North West Passage," he hides his fear under his self-mockery, but he cannot hide it in "At the Movies." Inuit and whites watch "a technicolour western shootemup" (5) film that, with its setting, clichéd struggle between good and evil, and tidy ending, could not be much further removed from the realities of clashing cultures in a harsh but beautiful landscape. Inside the hut that serves as a theatre, the atmosphere is "hot and stuffy as hell" (22) and the Inuit enjoy the action but do not understand the dialogue. Ironically, the world outside the theatre, the stage on which the poem's story "happens"

(37), is cold and beautiful. Further, unlike unintelligible dialogue, the landscape is as clear and satisfying as meaningful domestic symbols: "the fiord looks like poured blue milk [and] / mountains like bookmarks under a cold sky" (34-35). The irony of the moment causes Purdy to wonder about his abilities to write anything about the North that is not a "stupidity":

> [. . .] the point I'd hope to separate
> from all these factual things stubbornly
> resists me and I walk home slowly feeling stupid
> rejecting the obvious
> threading my way between stones in the mud
> with the beginnings of a headache. (44-49)

Placed in Purdy's volume between "The North West Passage" and "At the Movies," "Trees at the Arctic Circle" is not so much about elements in the northern landscape as it about a poet whose self-conscious attempts to understand the North generate insight into his own aesthetics.

Louis MacKendrick, in "Al Purdy," a chapter in a volume of Canadian Writers and Their Works (1990), suggests that this poem discloses Purdy's failure "to impose an identity by invidious comparison." In MacKendrick's view, the failure generates a moral discourse that Purdy restates in "The Country of the Young." As he points out, in this poem the figure of Jackson tells the poet that he "can't be looking for something else" (l. 34; MacKendrick 164). However, the question about what to look for is an aesthetic enquiry and not a moral one. It is about the process of perceiving and representing the world and human experience.

"Trees at the Arctic Circle" begins, in the tradition of a prospect poem, as a meditation on the landscape; it becomes, like other modernist poems, an expression of alienation or otherness in the world and of uncertainty about one's own perceptions both of that world and of oneself. The poem's language is that of an ethical discourse; the trees are cowardly but, later, they have a dignity that cannot be denied by a poet's scornful words and foolish judgement. This language, however, masks a self-conscious reflection about the nature of aesthetic interpretation. Rather than abandon or rewrite his initial description of the trees, Purdy leaves it as the first part of a conscious description of his changing perceptions. "I will not alter the poem," he decides, "but let the stupidity remain permanent / as the trees are / in a poem" (54-56). Purdy's recognition that the trees survive on the moisture they draw from the permafrost leads to an epiphany about his own writing. His ideas at the end of the poem grow from his struggle to understand his poetic failure; it is a struggle that parallels that of the trees to draw moisture from the permafrost or "use death" to survive in an arctic environment. Purdy's understanding of the trees changes; so does his understanding of the aesthetic process. George Bowering suggests that the change in Purdy's perspective evokes a "romantic admiration" (94). Allowing, however, for Modernism's continuation of Romanticism's rejection of "classical judgement," as Bowering puts it, the aesthetic this poem constructs is neither a belated form of Romanticism nor a modernist questioning of Romanticism. In "Trees at the Arctic Circle," Purdy looks again at his own poem and sees that his graceless attempt to describe the North is part of a process through which he creates its beauty.

Like those of Smith, Purdy's poems do not present an objective view of what nature seems, or seems not, to say. Instead, "Trees at the Arctic Circle" provides a vision of the process of constructing an aesthetic knowledge of the landscape. However, the relationship between Purdy's trees and his attempts to describe them is ambiguous. Purdy allows his "stupidity," or incomplete understanding of the Arctic, to stand. Iambic lines colour the trees with a dignity that his first perceptions had failed to recognize; the rhythm of the words suggest the existence of features of the North that cannot, otherwise, be contained in the meaning of those words. Purdy's failed aesthetic descriptions will remain as permanent as the bushes struggling to endure in a harsh environment; those trees, however, will remain permanent as his poem about them. These lines seem to echo an older tradition in which poetry grants immortality to transitory moments and to elements of nature, but Purdy's self-chastisement for the stupidity of his poem proposes that a poem's life may be somewhat shorter than eternity. Purdy's arctic trees endure in the northern landscape; what survives for the duration of a poem, and of the moment in which it is written and read, are only the poet's perceptions of those trees. The beauty of the landscape is a truth generated in poetry. It is also a truth that is other than the poet's aesthetic vision and cannot be contained within it; the realities of the world and of human experience remain "unbothered by any human opinion."

Purdy is a little disingenuous when he calls his poem a "stupidity." On Baffin Island, he revisits Ross's aesthetic. As Ross's dreams and images of death had done, Purdy's self-conscious reflections on Baffin Island discern a new kind of aesthetic truth. The knowledge of the North generated by his poems in North of Summer is not that of explorers in "The North West Passage." It is not a Romantic vision of art's ability to descry an enduring meaning in a mutable landscape. Nor is it the impressionist visions of Smith and the Group of Seven, or Scott's vision of a contest between an ancient land and modern development. Purdy's poems collect his observations and reflections about Baffin Island and his experiences of travelling there, and they describe a new process by which to know the world. Purdy is aware of the ancient "pink precambrian granite" ("Listening" 2), respects the confidence of Inuit hunters and their struggles to understand their historical and economic transactions with a southern-directed development, and accepts their laughter at his discomfort; he takes up Ross's paradoxical aesthetic in which beauty is an aesthetic construct that points to a truth that eludes expression.

Canadian modernist poetry has several points of departure and lines of development. One line of development is represented by The Canadian Mercury and its evidence of the struggles of the McGill movement to generate a new kind of poetry in Canada, elements of which are further exemplified in Smith's poems about trees and Scott's poems about the Mackenzie Delta. Roberts's failed quest for a new understanding of a changing world anticipates the paradoxical nature of an aesthetic which seeks a knowledge of reality that is inaccessible to other modes of thought and that cannot be reduced to aesthetic expressions. It is an aesthetic that is embodied in the poems that Ross published in The Dial and in Sonnets, and it is developed further by Purdy. Ross's aesthetic signalled a shift away from the perception of a truth that is inherent in nature or human experience, and Purdy's continues in the path Ross identified.

North of Summer generates a way of knowing the world by aestheticising it while confessing the poet's involvement in the creation of that knowledge. Ross's paradoxical aesthetic did not lead to expressions of a modernist anxiety concerning the loss of universal references but to celebrations of the vulnerable, transitory quality of human experience; it also resulted in a mistrust in the words and forms of poetry. After his Sonnets, Ross did not write very much. Purdy's North of Summer gives rise to a similar aesthetic with different consequences. When he grieves, it is not over the loss of universal truths but over the harmful effects of northern economic and political development. He celebrates the diversity of the North and the surprises it presents to his knowledge. Like Ross, he recognizes the paradoxical quality of aesthetic constructions. Poetry creates an understanding of the world that cannot be apprehended by other modes of thought, but it cannot reduce truth to its own images and words; poets cannot avoid "stupidities." Purdy's paradoxical aesthetic is, in the words of Jackson in "The Country of the Young," a recognition that the limitation of any aesthetic construct is also an invitation to look again at reality, but also it holds out a promise that, if truth remains outside the poem, there also remains something new to comprehend. Purdy's prolific career after North of Summer suggests that he continued to find much to comprehend.

In "Prelude Poem," Inuit "in mukluks climb / the snake fences" of Ameliasburg; images from his northern experiences haunt Purdy on his return home. In "Eskimo Graveyard, " the tents in which people live appear as "glowing swans." The figure of the swan returns in "Lament for the Dorsets" (1968), a poem published after North of Summer, but it is a synecdoche for Purdy's paradoxical aesthetic. Published in Northian in 1968, a revised version of the poem is included in his volumes, Wild Grape Wine

(1968) and in Selected Poems (1972).[31] Our knowledge of the Dorsets is derived from archaeological investigations, but Purdy searches for an alternative way by which we might understand something about them. An aesthetical investigation of artifacts from an archaeological site, his poem finds in those artifacts a point of departure from which to imagine their original context:

> Animal bones and some mossy tent rings
> scrapers and spearhead   carved ivory swans
> all that remains of the Dorset giants
> who drove the Vikings back to their long ships
> talked to spirits of earth and water
> --a picture of terrifying old men
> so large they broke the backs of bears
> so small they lurk behind bone rafters
> in the brain of modern hunters. (1-9)

What Purdy realizes in "Lament for the Dorsets" is similar to the effects achieved by Eliot, H. D., Pound, and Williams as they turned to ancient mythologies or the premodernist poetry of China or the French troubadours. As he does in "The North West Passage" and "Still Life in a Tent," in this poem Purdy searches the past for new perceptions of a changing, modern world. Purdy shares with the archaeologist, the student of the history of climate change, and other investigators of the past, a curiosity about how the Dorset culture became extinct. He speculates, for example, about weather cycles and changes in seal population and wonders if the hunters, who "couldn't figure it out,"

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[31] For this discussion, I rely on the version in The Collected Poems of Al Purdy.

> went around saying to each other
> plaintively,
> "What's wrong? What happened?
> Where are the seals gone?"
> And died. (24-29)

"Lament for the Dorsets," however, is not a scientific analysis presented in verse as ome writers had done in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Like others, Purdy thinks about scant historical information and speculative anthropological data ("puzzled Dorsets [. . .] with hairy thumbs around 1350 A. D." [22-23]), but he offers, through the aesthetic lens of a poem, an understanding of those objects that cannot be articulated by archaeology, history, or anthropology. He imagines the unimaginable, the fear experienced by the last Dorsets as they faced their own extinction, and, in so doing, he asks about the place of art in a world shaped by the twentieth-century fear of nuclear annihilation.

As he had done with the ground willows in "Trees at the Arctic Circle," Purdy sets aside his first attempts to describe the artifacts and begins again; he disturbs his own historical and sentimental vision with a question about the possibility of certain knowledge of the past. If the Dorsets "never imagined us in their future," he asks, "how could we imagine them in the past / squatting among the moving glaciers / six hundred years ago?" (34-36). The question is rhetorical, its answer almost beyond comprehension.

If "apartment dwellers [,] / executives of neon death [, and] / Warmakers with things that explode" (31-33) imagine a past culture, they can do so only by blurring it with an even older history; the Dorsets of 1350 are petrified among the remains of trilobites and dinosaurs (39-44). Purdy wants to find another understanding of the past made present in the artifacts he sees.

He sets aside the question about climatic or other causes of the end of the Dorsets and focuses on a single figure. He sets aside, too, his musings about the puzzlement of the ancient seal hunters and invites us to imagine with him ("Let's say") an aesthetic response:

> Some old hunter with one lame leg
> a bear had chewed
> sitting in a caribou skin tent
> --the last Dorset?
> Let's say his name was Kudluk
> carving 2-inch ivory swans. (ll.45-52)

The sculptor is an elderly and lame hunter caught in the last moments of his life and those of his people. Like the A. Y. Jackson of Purdy's letters to Laurence, he appears to be a spent force. What he carves, however, seems, like Arctic ground willows, to endure. Intended as a gift for the sculptor's dead granddaughter, it is laid aside, unfinished. Uncovered later by wind and archaeologists, it is completed in the words of another artist, one from a culture that cannot imagine the Dorset hunter with any more certainty than that hunter could have imagined us.

Purdy's poem aestheticises history. It creates an intersection of times and cultures where a swan carved from ivory becomes more than an elegy for an extinct culture. A small aesthetic object, and not simply an archaeological artifact, the swan becomes a tenuous link between the Dorsets, their anxieties, and their understanding of beauty, on the one hand, and the poet, the anxieties of his time, and his aesthetics, on the other. Scientific discourse discerns certain kinds of truth, but they cannot understand Purdy's question about how we may imagine the meaning of those truths. An unfinished sculpture, instead, generates the possibility of an answer, one which is given shape in the form of another crafted object, the poem itself. "Trees at the Arctic Circle" recognizes the limited abilities of aesthetic attempts to understand the reality of the world, but, in so doing, it keeps the willows alive by giving their struggle to endure a place in a poem, which continues to be read. In "Lament for the Dorsets," a fragment from an archaeological record is restored to its own context. "After 600 years," writes Purdy, "the ivory thought / is still warm" (72-4). Held warmly in a poem, the swan becomes a figure for the vitality of imagination, for the process by which a modernist aesthetic, turning perceptions of the past into perceptions of the present, creates a new understanding of human experience.

Purdy's paradoxical modernist aesthetic represents reality as something more than we can know and put into words of any kind, but which can also be perceived and expressed without becoming lost in the reductions of relativism. The arctic landscape and the people who lived, and continue to live, there, whether the Dorsets of 1350 or the Inuit of Baffin Island in 1965, cannot be contained within knowledge created by scientific and in poems written after Sonnets enabled him to express a Canadian identity. Precosky does not consider the poems in The Dial; rather, after a brief glance at Sonnets, which he dismisses as a failed "stab at traditional poetry," he uses poems from Laconics and from Shapes and Sounds to describe how the poetry of Ross works. He pays particular attention to Ross's use of concrete imagery, of poems linked together as a way of enhancing their meaning, and of forms that employ free verse, various patterns of metres and, occasionally, rhyme. Precosky concludes that Ross's choice of Imagism, therefore, enabled him to experiment with poetry that would make this transitional Modernist significant in Canadian literary history (185).

The tendency to read Ross as an imagist poet is challenged by more recent critics. Trehearne argues that Ross, like Raymond Knister, has been misread as an Imagist for two principal reasons. First, critics have failed to assess correctly the nature of Imagism and its relation to literary Impressionism and the Aesthetic movement. Second, the assessment of Ross as an imagist poet has been derived from a reading of Laconics and later poems. Such a reading has resulted in what Trehearne calls "the lost portion of his canon" (30), namely Sonnets. A fuller understanding of the complete works of Ross in a broader context of literary influences, Trehearne argues, reveals his work as "adaptations of the initial Imagist impulse" (61), which are determined largely by literary Impressionism.

Trehearne's study of Modernism, and what he posits as its precursors, namely, Aestheticism and Imagism, includes discussions of the poetry of Scott, Glassco, and Smith. In an early chapter on Knister and Ross, Trehearne negotiates the slippery ground of defining Imagism. Ross's imagist strategies include the use of the short line and attention to precise objects, but if Pound's Image (the juxtaposition of metaphors without subordination) was the defining element of Imagism, suggests Trehearne, it was not the determining element in the poetry of Ross (49). Arguing that Imagism is only one of the precursors to Modernism, he also argues that in order to assess its influence on Canadian poets we need to define it against another such precursor, namely, Impressionism, which has its roots in the Aesthetic movement. Significant for Trehearne's argument is a definition of Aestheticism as a preoccupation with beauty and its use of beauty as a figure for mutability and decay (33-34). Thus, while Ross's imagist, or modernist, poems deal conventionally with beauty in the natural world, his Sonnets seem preoccupied with beauty in the sense of nineteenth-century Aestheticism. "Contemplation of these twin faces of beauty in Ross's sharply divided oeuvre," writes Trehearne, "encourages a renegade understanding of this unique poet's achievement" (29).

In Trehearne's argument, Ross is a poet with a reputation for being an Imagist but one who, though employing certain imagist strategies, moves away from the central tenets of Imagism. Rather than employing direct and objective presentation, Ross imagines an experience that may not have happened "with lyric intensity in order to make it appear to have happened" (59). Trehearne concludes that

> Ross's subjectivity, then, affects many facets of his imagist poetics--it helps him to reject "direct treatment of the thing" in favour of imagining "the thing" in various states, past and future; it helps him to see beneath the surface of his chosen images to find human relevance, human content; it even alters, as he seeks to convey the precision of his mood, his manipulation of formal and stylistic properties. (59)

Callaghan identifies Ross's "rightful historical place in Canadian literature" as his participation in an early phase of Anglo-American Modernism. His brief reflections and cursory analysis of poems by Ross are intended only as a personal introduction to the collection. Precosky's discussion is more extensive. He dismisses Sonnets and attends to the imagist characteristics of Ross's other poetry. Trehearne's study complicates the picture, suggesting that Ross's significance does not lie in his being the first Canadian to work with Imagism or the Canadian who worked most fully with it; rather, the Ross who emerges from Trehearne's arguments is a poet who adapts to his own purposes elements from important currents in the literary movements that anticipated Modernism.

Compton takes up Trehearne's discussions of the relationship of Imagism and Impressionism. However, rejecting his sharp distinction between the two movements, she suggests that our understanding of Imagism's brief but significant existence deepens as we recognize its debt to Impressionism (50). The problem, therefore, is not with whether or not we read Ross as an Imagist but with whether or not we see the roots of Imagism in

Impressionism (59). Compton's genealogy of Ross's imagism begins, not with literary Impressionism, but with the French school of painting, a mode of painting in which, she argues, Canadians found justification for their continuing interest in nature. Impressionist painters broke with convention by refusing to represent landscape in ways that "memory, habit, or prescription told them to" and by gazing at the natural world as if "for the first time" (50). Their art, as she points out, influenced not only Canadian painters but also those poets whom she calls "the Canadian Imagists of the twenties and thirties," namely Ross, Knister, F. R. Scott, and Smith. What makes these poets impressionists is their attention to the constituent and changing elements of the landscape and not its size or grandeur (51). Of these poets, Ross draws Compton's attention. He becomes for her a poet through whose language Impressionism becomes Imagism, and whose Imagism discloses the influence of Impressionism. "For neither Smith nor Scott did the image suffice," she argues; "they wanted concepts." Ross's images, she continues, "are the purest acts of perception, and for Ross language is perception. In Ross's poetry [. . .] one finds an Impressionist with language: an Imagist. In Ross's Imagism, the Impressionist heritage is disclosed" (51).

According to Compton, the basis of painting for the French Impressionists was not in the treatment of historical, mythological, or religious subjects but in their experimentations with light and colour, which are means of an immediate and sensuous perception of reality (52), and in their habit of working directly from the scene. Thus impressionist painters rejected conventional strategies of perspectives and linear definition in order to represent the object directly. These, argues Compton, are elements Imagists take over from Impressionism. With that adoption comes an aesthetic of the moment in which the real is both visual and momentary (53).

Ross's "northernness," or "sharper tang," does not express a nationalist sense of place but a new aesthetic, for it represents his adaptation of Imagism to his perception of the light and mutability of his own environment. His attention to light and to how objects are configured in light is supplemented by his articulation of the "solidity of form, the shapes of things" (67). In Compton's essay, Ross's poetry becomes painting in words. Informed by the Impressionist program of capturing objects directly in the present moment of transition, Ross becomes not a transitional modern but a modernist poet of the transitory. Compton suggests that Ross uses words the way Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) used "colour as a means of modelling the underlying forms of visible objects" (67). Ross's accomplishment, therefore, is to render the "fleeting impression" and create images that memorialize and even monumentalize the object (67).

V

The nine poems by Ross in two issues of The Dial in 1928 constitute another point of departure for Canadian Modernism because, although they are marked with impressionist and imagist poetics, they are also "cubist" poems. The impressionist marks are clear. Images of a northern winter scene in "In the ravine," for example, of a city in its diversity in "Impression of New York," or of soldiers of "Soldiery" marching in wind and sunlight, emerge from a few sensory details. The lines suggest impressionist brush strokes: short and intense with selective repetition and dissociation, or fragmentation. Compton draws attention to a relationship between Impressionism in European painting and literary impressionism. By 1928, however, Impressionism had passed and art in Canada is being influenced, as it is in the United States and Europe, by Cubism. Ross's poems in The Dial reflect a dialogue with post-impressionist poetry.

If it is possible to talk about Impressionism in painting and about literary impressionism, is it also possible to talk about Cubism and a post-impressionist literature? Cubism, a new approach to the visual arts developed largely by Georges Braques, Juan Gris, and Pablo Picasso between 1907 and 1914, profoundly altered what occurs on the canvas and how a work in particular is "read" or perceived. On a Cubist canvas, planes intersect, merge, or fragment, and the shapes of objects combine and recombine in abstract form. Art historian John Canady points out that although, in its early analytical phase, Cubism tended to bury colour and other expressive values under its esoteric standards, the later phase of Synthetic Cubism restored these values to painting (432).

Cubism emerged initially without theory or codified standards; theory developed as the movement grew and reflected on its own practices. Francis Frascina points out that one of the sources of Cubist theorizing was Henri-Louis Bergson (1859-1941), remembered particularly for his ideas of duration and of an élan vital or life force. Among other things, the concept of duration refers to time experienced consciously as a continuous flux rather than as a succession of individual moments. Past, present, and future are not disjointed but coexist. Duration means that it becomes impossible to know the past because only the present is continually available. If this is so, then what matters on a canvas is the surface; we can experience only the present relations between shapes and volume. Bergson's idea of a life force underscores his sense of reality as constant flux. This life force is a process of change generating irreversible development and unrepeatable influence. Joyce and Woolf appropriated Bergson's concept of duration in the "stream of consciousness" of their novels, while George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) wrote his plays with the idea of the life force in mind. In Cubism, as Frascina points out, a consciousness of the present arises through shifting, transforming, and interpenetrating states of being (138). On the surface of the canvas, the several planes of an object intersect or alter each other. In so doing, they create multiple and fragmented views of an object or a figure.

In the poems Ross published in The Dial, a few impressionist sensory details shape new perceptions of time and space. The green water and sunlight of "Sonnet," for example, or the primary and earthen colours of revolving blossoms in "Flowers" and the yellow and tawny blur of sporting animals in "Lions" establish a concept of reality as being in a constant state of flux, fragmentary and fleeting. "In the ravine" presents an intimate view of a transitory moment of winter where nothing is frozen physically or aesthetically. Snow is not so much a thing as a thing in motion; it falls and it melts, its transitions underscored by selective repetition: "snowflakes / falling into the stream / into the stream." The stream is itself in motion:

> the winter creek   came
> around a bend   above
> and disappeared
> around a bench   below. (8-11)

To further highlight the continuing motion of this scene, when the creek is described a second time, Ross uses the same words but changes the pattern:

> Filled with melted snow
> to the brim
> the creek came
> around a bend--
> and disappeared below
> around a bend--
> ground covered with snow. (12-18)

Dashes interrupt the poem's brief narrative, describing the creek in terms of intense actions of short duration. The lines in the text are themselves in motion, parallelling the snow and the water, the impressions of which they create. At the same time, the prepositions of place are like several planes on a two-dimensional canvas, intersecting and fragmenting each other. The stream before it comes into view and after it disappears, and the melting snow and the snow covering the ground, are not disjointed moments but expressions of an experience viewed simultaneously from several angles. "In the ravine" is clearly a post-impressionist poem.

Although visual details, especially those of colour, dominate these poems, there are also representations of sounds. The rhythm created by repetition in the third line of "Soldiery," for example, contributes to the image of men marching to the beat of their drum: "over the earth, over the earth." These soldiers, like the snow and water of "In the ravine," are part of a world of elements that are few in number but always in flux, coming and disappearing, like the ravine's stream. In "An iron railway bridge," the "clanging swerve" and whistle of a train in motion contrast with the black, steel lines on which the train moves and the "sluggard smoke" (4, 7, 16, 23). These contrasting sounds set the speaker's gaze in motion, as do the sounds of rivets and traffic in "Impression of New York."

Ross's selection of visual and auditory details, together with his attention to light, engages with Impressionism and its concern with direct perception and representation as his means of establishing an aesthetic with a sharper tang than Canadian poetry had yet generated. This preoccupation with directness, Compton points out, informs the impressionist approach of Auguste Renoir (1841-1919) and Monet, and of such writers as Rilke and Paul Valéry (1871-1945). They "transcribed their immediate sensuous apprehension of reality, in terms of light and colour, pre-empting the reduction of the impression to abstraction, into established categories" ("W. W. E." 52). Such a movement forms part of what enabled Impressionism to revolutionize European art. Similarly, the emergence of a post-Romantic aesthetic employing free verse and other poetic strategies also pre-empts the reduction of poetry to received conventions.

Compton compares Ross not so much to Renoir and Monet as to Cézanne, whose transposition of volume and space to elements of abstract geometry was one of the elements with which Picasso and Braque would construct a new aesthetic (428). Ross's poetry, argues Compton, sometimes approximates the painting of Cézanne. "'Flowers,'" she points out, "pulsates with colour" (63) and "Skyscrapers," a poem in Laconics, reconfigures the way things exist in relation to light (66).

Compton contends that Ross's Cézanne-like use of light and colour, or sensuous detail gives shape and substance to small objects.in brief moments and exhibits an aesthetic that "articulates solidity of form, the shapes of things" (67). The solidity or shape of small objects (snow falling in a segment of a flowing creek, a summer afternoon in the sunlight beside a green river, taxis swarming like fish in New York City) discloses a process of fixing the mutable moment while denying the ability of an object to endure without change. "This is," suggests Compton,

> the paradox of the Impressionist's act. Rendering the fleeting impression, and that is all that is possible in changeability, confers a durability which is not inherent in the object. The aesthetic object (the image) does not, however, surpass the natural; that would be decadence. Not only does Ross (paradoxically) memorialize an object, his image also monumentalises the object. (67)

If Ross's poems are memorializations of fleeting impressions, they are also testimony to a sense of "duration," to a sense of reality defined, as a painting shaped within geometric abstractions, by the intersection of time and space. Within this intersection, experience is overdetermined by an irreversible flow or process of change.

Fleeting impressions and fragmentary objects in "In a ravine," for example, or a moment of reflection by a river in "Sonnet" celebrate transitory moments. "An iron railway bridge" presents a sequence of scenes both inside and outside a train, the effect of which is to create a collage of apparently simultaneous events. The railway bridge and tracks, the approach of the train, the gaze of "the first inventor" (11) and that of the speaker looking out the window, and the train's arrival are fragments of an object juxtaposed in this poem as they might be in a Cubist painting. Ross's poem, "Flowers," celebrates the momentary presence of colour in a garden without reference to a wider space in which these revolving flowers would emerge as disjointed elements, alienated from the rest of the world in the poem.

Compton suggests that Cézanne employed colour to create the substance and form of objects. If Ross's poetry can be compared to this aspect of Cézanne's painting, is it possible that his aesthetic, rather than memorializing the mutable moment, presents another perspective? His poetry aestheticises the fleeting moment. The desire of an earlier aesthetic for a fixed centre or an eternal beauty transformed art into a process of memorializing the mutable moment. Ross wants a sharper tang, the aesthetic of his sawmill. The meaning of a film that is projected onto a screen arises not from the freezing of each frame but from the rapid motion of the frames. Similarly, in Ross's poems for The Dial, the meaning of human experience emerges from the constant play of impressions and fragmented perceptions.

VI

At first glance, Sonnets, a collection of fifty-seven poems by Ross, appears to look back to the poetry of the Romantics and of the Aesthetic Movement and, thus, seems to be a retreat from Laconics. In the minds of his readers and critics, Ross is usually associated with the experimental lines and delicate sensory imagery. As both Kizuk and Trehearne point out, the Sonnets, although a substantial portion of Ross's work, has generally been ignored by critics of Canadian poetry (Kizuk 36; Trehearne 29). Like Roberts's Modernism, Ross's Sonnets, to paraphrase Roberts, steps aside from a Romantic aesthetic and moves towards that of Anglo-American Modernism. The poems, in fact, announce the death of an aesthetic in which the nature of beauty and the role of poetry previously appeared to be clear. They call for a new way of perceiving reality and human experience and they offer, through metaphors created from the language of spiritualism, an approach to such a new aesthetic.

Sonnets was enthusiastically received by Marianne Moore when it first came out. The title of her review, "Modern Thoughts in Disguise," is apposite, for Moore believes that, hidden in Ross's poems, which continue in the tradition of "the Spenser-Sidney-Milton-Wordsworth elegance," is a modern sensibility; his sonnets disclose a "freshness, responsibility, and authenticity of locality" (114-15). Ross's accomplishments with these poems mark him, in her judgement, as one of "the conspicuous poets of the day" (114). Moore concedes that this volume by Ross contains "an occasional defect" and, thinking it necessary to tell her readers that "poetry with the unforced note is rare," indicates some discomfort with Ross's prosody. Nevertheless, she gazes into the future and predicts that "if in matter and spirit the book is not valuable," she will be proved "far afield" (115). The obscurity which has enveloped Sonnets, however, would suggest that Moore miscalculated.

Ross's own retrospective assessment of his work is less effusive than Moore's earlier appraisal. In a letter to Smith nearly twenty years after the volume was published, he tells Smith that in Sonnets he had tried to keep a hand on the experimental approach of his earlier poetry while quietly stepping aside from it. He had tried, "from time to time," to revise Sonnets "but without success":

> The faults in language are too fundamental. I feel doubtful about some of the wording in the three you printed in your anthology. I think the Laconics [sic] are much better technically. Sonnets [sic] were a sort of exercise, a reactionary one, after my new departure in Laconics, 1925, which was based on a study of ancient prosody and no doubt influenced by my reading of some of the american [sic] poets. The general idea was to employ the "clean" language of free verse without the lack of rhythm or pattern which offended me in all of the latter except some of Pound etc. As regards Sonnets [sic] I had the notion that longer lines were needed to

> express ideas adequately and the sonnet form seemed suited to this purpose. I was ditched by my inability to carry over into them--the prestige of the models being so great--the aforesaid "cleanness." (20 March 1950; Darling 94-95)

Ross's sense, albeit with hindsight, that the collection had been an experiment should alert us to the possibility that his book was meant to do something other than rehearse a decayed Romanticism. The collection is explicitly philosophical; Ross's desire to "carry over" into these poems the structures and method, or the "cleanness," of his earlier work expresses his longing for a new aesthetic. Further, his retrospective sense of failure parallels a perspective that emerges from the sonnets themselves, namely, that earlier approaches to poetry are no longer accessible. Although Ross would continue to write poetry, including some translations, literary parodies, and a few poems in a style similar to his earlier ones, Sonnets is his last major work.

Ross arranged his sonnets in interesting groupings. The first group consists of eleven poems presenting images drawn from the myths and mysteries of classical Greece. Included are "The Piper of Pan," "Sappho," "Ion," and two sonnets entitled "Prometheus." Among a second group of eleven poems, we find "The Unseen Dwellers," "On the Supernatural," "The Call," and "The Pythagorean Basilica." This group employs the language of spiritualism, an occult movement of the late nineteenth century which enjoyed a revival in the 1920s and with which Ross was familiar. Eleven more form a third group entitled "On Beauty, Etc." This group includes "On Mythical Beauty," "Islands of Song," "On Flowers," "Blindness," "The Lake," and "Recognition." The poems are reveries, images of an imagined landscape, love poems and declarations about a poetry that provides new perspectives on experience and reality by aestheticising them. In the seven poems of the fourth group, "Somewhat 'Wordsworthian,'" Ross plays with an earlier aesthetic, using sonnets to look again at elements of the Ontario landscape in Laconics and to undermine a Romantic view of nature and memory. A final group of seventeen poems, entitled "Sometimes Quite Imitative," develops further Ross's own, paradoxical, aesthetic. These sonnets, among which are "The Nimble Fish," "The River Speaks," "Barbizon, France," and "The Lover Plaineth the Absence of His Love," exemplify a way of conceptualizing reality that both seeks a vision of what moves beyond the surface of the words of a poem and confesses the limitations of an aesthetic perspective.

Like archaeologists who dig up remnants of the past in the hopes of finding material to help them develop their present understanding of human history and experience, Ross, in his Sonnets, pokes among the ruins of a past aesthetic for elements to help him to do two things. Searching elements of an older aesthetic, Ross wants to tap into the creative sources of early poetry rather than recycle the petrified conventions prevailing in much of the Canadian poetry of his day. Further, like the Modernists who engaged with the Metaphysical poets or the medieval troubadours, Ross--had he been able find them--might have found features from the prosody of the past with which he could have generated a new kind of poetry and created new perceptions of the relationship between words and reality. In a letter to Ralph Gustafson, Ross writes that the sonnets "were written mostly as exercises, really" (1 October 1956; Whiteman No 38) and were based, he told Smith, "on a study of ancient prosody" (20 March 1950; Darling 94). In a moment, this chapter will look at a sonnet by Albert Durrant Watson (1859-1926), a Toronto astronomer who produced several works of poetry and verses for Methodist and Presbyterian hymnals, and another by Getrude MacGregor Moffatt (1884-1923), who studied at McMaster University and whose poems were gathered after her death. Both poems represent elements of the strain of Romanticism against which Canadian Modernism emerged but, first, we should ask why Ross uses the classical benchmarks he found in that study.

At the risk of overgeneralizing, it may be argued that poets from Petrarch to Seamus Heaney (b. 1939) use elements of ancient prosody as a means by which to break from the influence of their immediate precursors who have set the prevailing standards and dominant conventions of literature. Writers of the Renaissance, for example, employed classical literary traditions to step out from under the weight of the medieval accomplishment, in the process developing new ideas about individual subjectivity and appropriate poetic matter, and colouring their work with the authoritative hues of an ancient genealogy. Augustan poets used classical traditions as one might navigate a row boat, looking to past benchmarks as a means of arriving at orderly forms, decorum, and tasteful subject matter. Romantic poets, such as Keats and Shelley caught classical breezes in their revolutionary imaginations, using them to power their reconceptualisation of external reality. Classical forms and myths, transplanted from Aristotelian and neoclassical aesthetics of representation, aestheticised Nature as a screen on which to project what Wordsworth, in his preface to Lyrical Ballads (1800), called "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (25). As they did for Nietzsche's poets in Human, All Too Human (1878), for such transitional Modernists as Yeats and Pratt, and for central figures of Modernism, such as Pound, Eliot, and H. D., classical myths "procure for the present new colours through a light which they direct upon it from the past" (Hollingdale 125).

Ross employs classical forms of Petrarchan and Spenserian sonnets to investigate possibilities for a new aesthetic. In "Lampman and the Death of the Sonnet" (1976), Louis Dudek claims that at "the present moment" the literary tradition of the sonnet "is quite dead." It died in the hands of Lampman; if more recent poets had attempted to resurrect the form, then "it only came up to a sitting position--and lay down again in their pages of pure homage to the form" (41). The continuing, creative use of the sonnet by such diverse twentieth-century poets as W. H. Auden (1907-73), John Berryman (1914-72), Gwendolyn Brooks (b. 1917), Robert Frost (1874-1963), Seamus Heaney, Geoffrey Hill (b. 1932), Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950), John Crowe Ransom (1888-1974), and Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) undermines Dudek's claim about what he calls the "hypertrophy," or deadly overgrowth of the form. Contemporaries of Ross also made use of traditional poetic forms. The quality of Smith's "Archer" (1937; 1943) for example, and Klein's "XXII Sonnets" (1931), Livesay's "Sonnet for Ontario" and "September Morning" (1932), and Scott's "Sonnet" (1926) suggest that the sonnet's death was prematurely announced. Nor was the use of classical myths been extinguished. Smith's "Adolescence of Leda" (1963) for example, reworks classical myths while his "Prothalamium" alludes to classical forms and concepts.

Even if the sonnet was not completely dead in Ross's day, there were nevertheless sick patients. Two in the 1926 edition of John Garvin's Anthology, Canadian Poets, provide random examples of a version of an aesthetic that had generated the lively sonnets of the British Romantics or the Canadian Confederation Poets. Watson's poem, "God and Man," fuses Christian platitudes with abstract visions of the natural environment. The octave describes God; the sestet, man. "God is eternity, the sky, the sea," writes Watson, "The consciousness of universal space, / The source of energy and living grace." Human beings are atoms in an eternal universe:

A light that twinkles in a distant star,
    A wave of ocean surging on the shore,
Or substance with the sea; a wing to soar
    Forever onward to the peaks afar;
A soul to love, a mind to learn God's plan,
    A child of the eternal--such is man. (9-14)

In the octave of her sonnet, "The Pine," Moffatt presents a tree silhouetted against the twilight sky; in the sestet, it becomes a figure for God's desire

to lift a lowly flower
To be the symbol of some glorious hour;
Or to call in a shepherd from his hill,
To be a king; or to exalt this pine
Against the sky, minaret-like, and fine. (10-14)

These poems move with an enthusiastic Romantic vision of the individual placed on a cosmic stage. They fuse passion, high-mindedness, and spirituality according to the formula of the magazines and books found in middle-class households. There is an overflow of emotion in these poems, but it is too contained to appear spontaneous. The images are excessively idealistic, as in Watson's "child of the eternal," or too much out of place, as in Moffatt's vision of a minaret in an officially Christian Canada prior to the immigration of Muslims in noticeable numbers.

Ross's Sonnets formulate an aesthetic at odds with a late version of Romanticism. Like his contemporaries in the McGill movement, Ross draws on classical myths, but whereas the Confederation Poets prolonged Romanticism with this practice, Ross and his modernist contemporaries aimed to effect a break with it and its lifeless imitations, such as the poems of Watson and Moffatt. The third section of Laconics includes such poems as "Aurora," "Ariane," "Lethe," and a longer poem, "Death of Orpheus." Commenting on this section, Kizuk argues that "Ross works with the stock mythical subjects of the decadent era" but adds that he does so "differently from the way MacInnes, MacDonald or Pickthall might have done." Ross recovers figures from classical mythology, he adds, "not for the sake of literary reverie but as a test for the strength of his methodological attitudes towards truth in poetry" (Kizuk 43). The explicitness and simplicity of what Moore calls Ross's scientific "method of attaining originality by way of veracity" ("Experienced" 281) is part of the aesthetic experiment in Sonnets; he takes hold of, and steps aside from, such figures as Pan and Prometheus.

"On Mythical Beauty," the title piece of the third group of Sonnets, exemplifies of Ross's use of the conventions of the sonnet to engage with classical myths:

> O all this beauty shall not remain obscured.
> The older myths in which it is contained
> Shall still reveal themselves; their form regained
> Becoming ever clearer, not immured
> Within the darkness that has long endured,
> Nor shall the tension of a moment strained
> Lose what the centuries have still retained,
> What ages, though destructive, have assured.
> Pure rays of sunlight from an earlier day
> Will gently nurse forth shoots, tender at first,
> Then stronger, from the illimitable soil,
> Fecund, of the human spirit; in new ways
> Will issue newer energies, to burst
> Forth from their hiding place after much toil.

The octave suggests that the concept of beauty has been obscured by destructive history. Ross's sonnets propose that we may reconceptualize that concept, not by looking to the uses Western culture has made of ancient myths, but by returning to the myths themselves. Ross's sestet suggests that the glimpses of beauty caught in ancient myths become the mulch that provides the human spirit with new energy. For Ross, classical myths serve aesthetically, as they had for his precursors, to renew the imagination and enable the development of new poetic practices.

Paradoxically, in Ross's vision the myths themselves are of limited value. In "Golden Apollo," the god is represented through the instruments of ancient songs and ritual. "Bright-beaming with radiance clear and fine / As are the rays of sunlight sweet and strong," they enchanted "all the watchers" who "marvel at the sight" (12-14). As other sonnets make clear, however, the temples are closed and Ross's generation has no direct access to the splendour ancient worshippers saw in Apollo. The myths and poetic sources of the past die like the sweet sounds in "The Pipes of Pan."

The three poems that open Ross's collection, "On the Cessation of Oracles," catalogue what is not accessible to poets in the twentieth century. The first summarizes Ross's view of the futility of the wistful longing for the myths of another time exemplified in the longing of such early Modernists as the Aesthetes and Decadents, and in that of twentieth-century Romantic epigones.

> "The well is dry and ceased the babbling water" [sic]
> From spring into sunlight at the source;
> Gone is the trail of that mysterious force,
> No priestess telling what the god has taught her.
> No smoke ascends from sacrificial altar;
> The land deserted has denied its nurse;
> There are no ceremonies to rehearse,
> And time has put this place to pitiless slaughter.
> The attendant nymphs have vanished with the rest.
> The god's prophetic mantle is no more.
> No Pythia, contorted on the seat,
> Strives for an utterance as long before.
> The oracle is ceased, no longer blest;
> The wreckage of the temple is complete.

Poets, like the speaker in this sonnet, may desire a "speech melodious from minds /

Attuned to beauty that was never lost," or yearn for the aesthetic of the past; they succeed, however, only in fantasizing about the archipelagoes in "Islands of Song" which possess a "deceiving smile" (12). Sonnets is a declaration that the aesthetic vision of Ross's precursors has become illusory and unattainable.

Shelley had imagined his own idyllic island in "Lines Written Among the Euganean Hills" (1819), a topographical poem in which he expresses the idea that poetry educates not the human mind but the human soul. It is not surprising, therefore, that in his great lyrical drama, Prometheus Unbound (1820), Shelley reconfigures the rebellious Prometheus of classical myth as "the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends" (981). Shelley's Romantic aesthetic accords poetry the role of passionately expressing the best qualities of human nature. His aesthetic makes it possible for him, in "A Defence of Poetry" (written in 1821 but published in 1840), to claim for poets the role of "unacknowledged legislators of the world"; they are mediums who discover "those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered" and "the future in the present" (1086; 1073). Shelley was following Byron's own use of Prometheus as a heroic moral figure. In Byron's "Prometheus" (1816), the mythical figure becomes an aesthetic one that expresses both a human desire to endure tyranny and suffering ("His wretchedness, and his resistance") and a vital human spirit ("Triumphant where it dares defy, / And making death a victory" [796]). Mary Shelley's vision of a "modern Prometheus" in her novel Frankenstein (1818; 1831) was more critical; she used the classical myth to emphasize not "the purest and the truest motives," but human hubris in a world obsessed with science and the apparently unlimited potential of technology.

While Byron and both Shelleys placed the figure of Prometheus within an aesthetic that carries a moral burden, Ross makes a statement about the need for, and possibilities of, a new kind of aesthetic. In her review of Sonnets, Moore cites in full only one of the poems, "Prometheus--2" ("Modern" 114); its rhythms, language, and images make it one of the better pieces in the collection. Ross's Prometheus, "bound in adamantine chains / To the grim rock stark-lifting from the sea" (1-2), is not Byron's tortured figure of heroic resistance. Instead, resigned to "some increase to his pains," with eyes "growing dim," and "Discouraged," this Prometheus "relaxed the effort vain / Of rude rebellion" (8-11). In "Prometheus--1," Ross's figure, like Shelley's poets, can "pierce the future with prophetic sight" (11), but that future promises neither his freedom nor the overthrow of the tyrannical Zeus. What is promised instead is Nietzsche's "twilight of the gods"; Prometheus proclaims that Zeus will be "forced down to Night" (14).

Ross's vision of the twilight of a past aesthetic opens a way for a new engagement with the beauty that had illuminated ancient prosody. Although Prometheus can envision the downfall of Zeus, the golden Apollo "Never can disappear into a cloud" ("Golden Apollo" 1). His music is a "celestial fire," and his beauty an "empyreal light" (3, 11). The eternal quality of beauty may be reincarnated but only in a new aesthetic; the old aesthetic is lost.

VII

Ross was a scientist with a degree in chemistry; he was also interested in the spiritualism of the 1920s. As James McClenon has defined it in the Encyclopedia of Religion and Society (1998), spiritualism is a "[r]eligious and social movement based on the belief that it is possible to communicate with the deceased after their bodily death" (492). Fraudulent mediums and practices like table-tipping attracted much negative publicity but the genuine practice of spiritualism includes paranormal phenomena that have prompted numerous scientific investigations. American Spiritualism was a nineteenth-century movement which began in 1848 but continued into the twentieth century (492). Spiritualism, according to Robert S. Ellwood, in his article, "Occult Movements in America" (1988), experienced some revival in the 1870s, 1920s, and again in the 1960s. Ellwood also points out that its adherents included advocates of abolition, women's rights, and utopian economic reform (716). What "free verse" was to twentieth-century poetry, spiritualism was to twentieth-century religion. The practices of its mediums, Ellwood argues, represent a combination of the Swedenborgian understanding of spirits and Mesmer's states of consciousness. Spiritualism was an open, experimental movement and, like Pentecostalism, it was an "American spiritual export" (716). It is intriguing that Ross, who experiments with new forms of prosody associated with innovative writers and calls for a "North American" aesthetic, should have been interested in a religious movement that experimented with new practices, attracted a variety of progressive or radical people, and was an indigenous North American expression.

"Because of my fundamental beliefs and experience," Ross told Smith in a letter in 1950, spiritualism and dreams were "naturally prominent in all my work for many years." He admitted that some of his "experience and studies have been unusual and their product must naturally be looked at askance by the majority." Nevertheless, he adds, "I have decided to stick by what is evidently my real trend though I realize it leads me away from rather than towards publication" (20 March 1950; Darling 95). Not only was Ross prepared to run counter to majority opinion with his interest in spiritualism, but also he was determined, as he writes in another letter to Smith a few years later, to avoid confusion of his use of the word "spiritual" with traditional religious ideas. "Spiritual," he tells Smith in 1958, "is a word that has broadened out, or down, from its original significance," a significance, he says, he first understood from Paul's polarized definition in Romans: "For if the Gentiles have been made partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister unto them in carnal things" (Rom. 15:27). "The Greek pneumatikos," Ross continues, "meant 'belonging to breath or wind' or 'of the spirit.'" What concerns him, however, is that the word, "unfortunately, tends to connote the ecclesiastical, churchliness, etc." Wanting to avoid such connotations, Ross tells Smith that he was thinking of replacing "spiritual" in some of his sonnets with the word "spirit" (28 January 1958; Darling 121).

The main theme of his poems, Ross writes to Gustafson in 1947, "cannot be acceptable at the present time since, roughly speaking, it embraces much that is anathema in an age of enlightenment." According to Ellwood, spiritualists were often interested in North American shamanism (716). "I am," Ross tells Gustafson, "much closer, mentally, to the medicine man than to Diderot" (22 July 1947; Whiteman No 28); a scientist, he seems, nevertheless, to have thought he had more in common with non-rational visions of the world than with the instrumental rationality of the 1920s, a period of economic and technological development in Canada and the United States. Ross's sonnets question a Canadian Romantic aesthetic and its use of classical myths. Recurring motifs of dreams and death and the image of the poets as a medium create, in the language of spiritualism, metaphors for a poetry that rejects poetry like that of Watson or Moffat and moves towards the paradox of an aesthetic that locates the spirit of an eternal beauty in its own finite and fragmentary perceptions.

Dreams exercising their influence on the unconscious provide some of the vocabulary for Ross's aesthetic. "On Mythical Beauty" postulates a "darkness that has long endured" and "Pure rays of sunlight from an earlier day" (5, 9). The "older myths" (2) and the beauty they contain, crossing the borders of time as light that enters a realm of darkness in which they "nurse forth shoots" which will later "burst / Forth from their hiding place" (13-14). "Dream-Way," which begins the second group of poems in Sonnets, imagines a "country of dreams" as a transitional zone between the dark water of death and higher regions into which souls migrate:

> It may be that the country of a dream
> Illuminated, or remaining dim or dark,
> Resembles that low shore where souls embark
> Into the zone where shades and shadows teem;
> With no more than a momentary gleam
> From higher spheres. (1-6)

Inhabiting zones between light and darkness, and between the conscious mind and the unconscious, dreams erase boundaries between life and death, and they make what is known less secure in the presence of an irrational knowledge. They parallel "The zone of difficulty in the mind" in "To the English Language--2," through which old refrains of English poetry cross to "The inner cell of recollection" (7, 8).

Ross wrote to Smith that he had read the work of Freud and others on dreams (20 March 1950; Darling 95). In the Interpretation of Dreams (1900), the first English translation of which appeared in 1913, Freud employed the concept of language as a metaphor for the operations of dreams. Dream thoughts, or the latent meaning of a dream and its psychological purpose, and "the manifest content of dreams," writes Freud,

> are presented to us like two versions of the same subject-matter in two different languages. Or, more properly, the dream-content seems like a transcript of the dream-thoughts into another mode of expression, whose characters and syntactic laws it is our business to discover by comparing the original and the translation. The dream-content, on the other hand, is expressed as it were in a pictographic script, the characters of which have to be transposed individually into the language of the dream-thoughts. (381)

If language can serve as a metaphor for what dreams do, then dreams can function as a metaphor for language and, in particular, aesthetic language. "Dreams," argues Freud, "are psychical acts of as much significance as any others"; their significance lies in their motives, which are "in every instance a wish seeking fulfilment" (681). The image of a throng of angels in a "zone ethereal" in "On the Supernatural" (18), and the fantasy of "Island of Songs," exemplify a desire to recover a "speech melodious from minds / Attuned to beauty that was never lost" (5-6), or the yearning for an access in "On Mythical Beauty" to that beauty hidden in ancient myths. They are the contents of dreamlike environments. In "The Lake," the figure of a stranger lured by a perilous cold lake, who is "seen in youthful glory diving, / Then chilled and dead in water beautiful" (13-14), contains none of the elegiac reality of Milton's "Lycidas" or the surrealistic Modernism of Layton's "breathless swimmer" in "The Cold Green Element" (1955).

At least since William Langland's dream vision, Piers Plowman (1372-79), dreams have figured in literature in English, but what is interesting about Ross's use of dreams in some of his sonnets and the creation of a dreamlike atmosphere in others is that they are not allegories or metaphors for experiences which that can be described through other modes of discourse, such as theology, ethics, or psychology. They are, instead, the vocabulary of what Ross would call a few poems published in Poetry in 1934, "irrealistic verses." Their dream states exemplify a wish for a new way to apprehend the nature of human experience. They are "irrealistic" glimpses of reality that lie beyond the premodernist representational aesthetic, Canadian Romanticism, or the scientific discourses of geophysicists or psychoanalysts.

In "Dream-Way," the dream is death's brother. Although in the transitional zone "all surroundings threatening, ominous seem," souls who "embark into the zone" will soon learn that the dream "merges into death" (15). Death is a recurring figure in Ross's poems. It haunts "On the Cessation of the Oracles"; it is the goal of seductive music in "The Pipes of Pan," and the cause of unknowable responses of land and sea when Sappho commits suicide. The figure of death expresses aspects of reality or experience he does not think can be glimpsed except aesthetically. Its finality is a metaphor for the limits of rational perception and moral discourse. That all modes of perception are finite, unable to contain the whole of reality, frightens us. The presence of what we cannot comprehend endangers our concepts of what we already know; therefore, Ross's figure, as in "To Death," for example, "frightens fearfully / Hinting we shall be held long underground" (13-14). It stalks us in "By the River" or, as the "Chiefest of mummers and masked mysteries," on "the stage of humankind" ("To Death" 1-2).

As the myth of Persephone reminds us, though, to "be held long underground" is not to be held there forever. In "The Call," Ross takes us to a spiritualist séance in which a group of people watch and call on the dead. They wait for an answer to come from "the gathering places of the gloom" which are "Not sinister, but comforting." It is an image of Spiritualism's confidence that communications between the living and dead are possible: "The dead are gone, and yet the dead return," the speaker chants; "There's no finality in a funeral" (20). The sonnet reflects the interest Ross had in spiritualism; it also provides a metaphor for his aesthetic. In the dream-like atmosphere of the séance, the watchers discover, as do the migrant souls in "Dream-Way," that the boundaries between the dream state and wakefulness, between life and death, are blurred. In his sonnets, Ross juxtaposes images of dreams and séances with those of death; his paradoxical aesthetic places alternatives of the poets' imagination in apposition to an awareness of the limited quality of aesthetic perception. In the lexicon of spiritualism, death establishes a zone between the living and those from whom it has separated them, but an "irrealistic" communication proves possible across that zone. Like a séance, poems enable a vision of elements of reality that lie beyond the concepts our discourses permit us. As Freud's interpretation of dreams led to an understanding of their apparent absurdities, Ross's poems tentatively suggest that his aestheticised spiritualism may open up a path to the solution of "lasting mysteries" (15); Sonnets imagines that it may be possible to create a new kind of aesthetic by which we may perceive what we cannot conceptualize through rational and ethical modes of discourse.

Ross's sonnets are not propaganda on behalf of the spiritualism movement. Rather, metaphors drawn from spiritualism become his contribution to the aesthetic of Modernism or what Waugh describes as a "proliferation of value." They express a particular way of knowing the world and our experience of it, an aesthetic that is, as Smith puts it in "Wanted--Canadian Criticism," conscious of "its position in time" (601). Ross's unorthodox spiritualism provides a vocabulary for an aesthetic that is a way, to borrow Waugh's words, of viewing modernity. An aesthetic engagement with the world, she argues, seeks "new possibilities for creatively shaping or inhabiting our human environment and of renegotiating the boundaries of identity in ways which, without necessitating total abandonment of Enlightenment thought, may release us from the hidden tyrannies of universalising modes and their invisible exclusionary tactics" (8). As a geophysicist, Ross is a direct heir of Enlightenment thought. He is also a poet whose prosody functions like a spiritualist medium summoning the spirits from another zone, invoking the spirits of Petrarch's sonnets, Imagism, Impressionism, and Cubism, not in order to create an other-worldly vision, but to aestheticise the mundane realities of urban and rural life in twentieth-century North America. This mundaneness is exemplified in his poems by descriptions of the Ontario wilderness and images of fishing, swimming, sawing logs, reading classical myths, riding a train, watching the traffic move between skyscrapers, and writing poetry. Ross's is an aesthetic that seeks to break the tyranny of an exhausted version of Romanticism. Reading "large gobs of Roberts and others," Ross says in a letter to Gustafson,

> is like trying to swallow a mass of feathers from a slit pillow. [. . .] Isn't Lampman's "Life and Nature" (Oh, Life! Oh, Life!) simply one of the silliest pieces ever written, if you examine it closely--and all because he either didn't like organ music or happened to run into some bad organists ("moaning shrill")? And "The Piper of Arll" has always been one of my

> pet aversions." (19 August 1959; Whiteman No 51)

The world cannot be contained in conventional poetic measures; a new prosody is required. Paradoxically, however, exact words and the creation of sensory descriptions are the only means by which irreducible, elusive perceptions of the world may be conceptualized (or sought and glimpsed).

Ross's images of dreams and death do not offer a systematic approach to discerning beauty, or aesthetic truth; instead, they offer new perceptions, not of a mystical world, but of the reality we experience. Like the archaeologist digging up the remnants of the past, or like those who used fragments of Greek and Roman buildings to build their barns or shore up their cottages, his poems sift through his memories of the Ontario landscape and the ruins of older aesthetic practices for elements he can use to express a new kind of poetry and reconceptualize the relationship between words and reality. Rituals performed in an "ancient church," which, in "The Pythagorean Basilica," has been unearthed from "beneath the street" (1), have been forgotten and the vitality of Romanticism has disappeared, leaving only ruins, as in MacDonald's Flagon of Beauty, for example, or the sonnets of Watson and Moffat, and many of the poems in The Canadian Mercury. Drawn from his experiences of rural and urban life, and of spiritualism, Ross's images become figures that describe a new process of imaginatively knowing the world. "The Wise Men," the poem that closes his explicitly spiritualist group of sonnets, presents a glimpse of Babylonian astronomers surveying "the passing sky" and "all the lore that they had often told / To one another"; they weave "curious lore" that leads them to a "newer wonder" (2, 5-6, 9, 13). Surveying ancient prosody and drawing on his reading of his contemporary poets, Ross weaves a paradoxical aesthetic in which reality eludes the reductionist discourse of geophysics and psychoanalysis, and of a marriage of an old prosody with the English Canadian nationalism of the 1920s. It is a reality as hostile as the cold water of "The Lake" and as much beyond poetry's grasp as the slippery rocks and weed fronds are beyond the diver. Ross's perceptions of the world and of our experiences of it are translated into images of fleeting impressions and tiny or fragmented objects. In "On the Supernatural," he writes that "[w]e love the natural," or that which we think is sufficiently expressed in our words where "human reason [is] seated on a throne, / Creator of kingdoms for itself alone" (6-7). He invites us to

> affirm the supernatural
> However doubtfully we have looked upon
> Its bare existence in time that's gone,
> For it is ever near and ever real;
> As we shall find. (1-5)

Ross does not permit us to escape the world. From both his poems in The Dial and his Sonnets, a modernist aesthetic emerges that accords us glimpses of our experiences and relationships with reality. It creates knowledge of ourselves and our environment that eludes other modes of perception. This knowledge is hostile to our confidence that our concepts take us to the "bottom line" of understanding. His poems invite us, in perceiving these fleeting glimpses, to find in them the shapes and sounds of beauty.

CHAPTER 4

ROBERTS'S SECRET GARDEN: IN SEARCH OF AN ELUSIVE AESTHETIC

> I have a garden in the city's grime
> Where secretly my heart keeps summer-time.
>
> Charles G. D. Roberts, "My Garden"

Noticing a renewed interest in the work of Pratt, Sandra Djwa asks about the extent to which he was "a modernist in his poetic practices" ("The 1920s" 55); her essay answers her own question by identifying Pratt as a "transitional modern" whose work bridges Romanticism and Modernism in Canadian poetry. To a similar question about Charles G. D. Roberts and, more specifically, the author of New York Nocturnes and Other Poems,[24] this chapter contends that Roberts is a belated Romantic who both contributes to the Romanticism that the Modernism of the McGill poets sought to displace, but who also anticipates Ross's paradoxical modernist aesthetic.

The garden, a meeting of nature and city, is an apt metaphor for Roberts's poetry between 1896 and 1927 in which we find both late Romanticism and a desire for something new. The first section of this chapter discusses "In the Night Watches" (1927), a poem that illustrates Roberts's desire for a new aesthetic. A brief review of critical approaches that generally dismiss New York Nocturnes will follow in a second section. These critical discussions suggest that the years 1896-1927 represent a period of decline in Roberts's poetry. His belated use of elements of Romanticism accounts for this decline, which, together with his struggle to push beyond Romanticism, will be the subject of a third section in this chapter.

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[24] All quotations from Roberts's poems rely on Desmond Pacey's critical edition of his poetry, The Collected Poems of Sir Charles G. D. Roberts (1985).

A fourth section will argue that, in their formal elements, the poems of New York Nocturnes exemplify a tension between a languishing but enervated strain of Romanticism and a desire for Modernism. Subsequent parts will discuss the significance of the volume's place in the tradition of literary cities, the nature of Roberts's ideal beauty, and the metaphor of his garden. A eighth part will conclude this discussion of New York Nocturnes; setting aside Roberts's success as a late Romantic poet, it will argue that the failure of his desire to break through into a modernist aesthetic anticipates Ross's paradoxical aesthetic.

I

To what extent is Roberts a Modernist in his poetry? Like Ross's poems, "An iron railway bridge" and "Impression of New York," verses by Roberts, such as "Brooklyn Bridge" (1899) and "On the Elevated Railway at 110th Street" (1898), delight in an urban landscape. "Monition" (1907) expresses a modernist sense of the fleeting quality of urban experience in a mutable world:

A faint wind, blowing from World's End,
    Made strange the city street.
A strange sound mingled in the fall
    Of the familiar feet.

Something unseen whirled with the leaves
    To tap on door and sill.
Something unknown went whispering by
    Even when the wind was still.

And men looked up with startled eyes
    And hurried on their way,
As if they had been called, and told
    How brief their day.

The sentiment anticipates Modernism's preoccupation with a changing world, but

Roberts personifies mutability. With such personification, together with indistinct details and cross-rhymed quatrains, the poem reflects formal qualities of much of the poetry of late Romanticism. Another of Roberts's poems, "In the Night Watches," however, moves towards Modernism in both its themes and its prosody:

When the little spent winds are at rest in the tamarack tree
In the still of the night,
And the moon in her waning is wan and misshapen,
And out on the lake
The loon floats in a glimmer of light,
And the solitude sleeps,--
Then I lie in my bunk wide awake.
And my long thoughts stab me with longing,
Alone in my shack by the marshes of lone Margaree.

Far, oh so far in the forests of silence they lie,
The lake and the marshes of lone Margaree,
And no man comes my way.
Of spruce logs my cabin is builded securely;
With slender spruce saplings its bark roof is battened down surely;
In its rafters the mice are at play,
With rustlings furtive and shy,
In the still of the night.

Awake, wide-eyed, I watch my window-square,
Pallid and grey.
(O Memory, pierce me not! O Longing, stab me not!
O ache of longing memory, pass me by, and spare,
And let me sleep!)
Once and again the loon cries from the lake.
Though no breath stirs

The ghostly tamaracks and the brooding firs,
Something as light as air leans on my door.

Is it an owl's wing brushes at my latch?
Are they of foxes, those light feet that creep
Outside, light as fall'n leaves
On the forest floor?
From the still lake I hear
A feeding trout rise to some small night fly.
The splash, how sharply clear!
Almost I see the wide, slow ripple circling to the shore.

The spent winds are at rest, But [sic] my heart, spent and faint, is unresting,
Long, long a stranger to peace. . .
O so Dear, O so Far, O so Unforgotten-in-dream,
Somewhere in the world, somewhere beyond reach of my questing.
Beyond seas, beyond years,
You will hear my heart in your sleep, and you will stir restlessly;
You will stir at the touch of my hand on your hair;
You will wake with a start,
With my voice in your ears
And an old, old ache at your heart,
(In the still of the night)
And your pillow wet with tears.

Thematically, "In the Night Watches" appears to be a Romantic poem. A solitary loon, furtive mice hidden in the rafters, and "brooding firs" create a world of nature that reflects the speaker's isolation. This isolation is temporarily resolved in the final stanza as the speaker thinks of his beloved "Beyond seas, beyond years" (39), and tenderly pictures her alone and missing him. The speaker is aware of his restlessness and isolation, and aware, too, that he is imagining his beloved's loneliness; his self-consciousness reflects a mental process by which the significance of the real implications of time and space are diminished. The speaker's conscious vision of his absent beloved may be read as a reflection of a desire as instinctual as "A feeding trout [rising] to some small night fly" (32). Or perhaps the poem expresses a Romantic concept that the separated couple are united precisely in their isolation and loneliness. There is also, however, a clear leap towards a modernist sensibility.

If Romanticism looks at the objective reality of nature and perceives reflections of human subjectivity, this poem looks at an individual's thoughts and sees in them not self-delusion but the ability of imagination to apprehend reality differently. "In the Night Watches" does not point to self-delusion, however; it aestheticises reality and human experience. The cabin's isolation underlines not the tranquil recollection of painful memories ("O ache of longing memory, pass me by and spare, / And let me sleep" [21]), but their transformation into a vision of the subjective nature of reality. Imagination is a process that includes synaesthesia, or the fusion of distinct sensory experiences into a new awareness. The speaker's restless night thoughts about himself and his surroundings in "the forests of silence" (10) enable him to transform the sound of a splash into a vision of a fish jumping out of the water and of the widening ripples that ensue. The speaker's thoughts widen further to transform his longing for his beloved into an image of her awareness of his significance:

> You will hear my heart in your sleep and you will stir restlessly;
> You will stir at the touch of my hand on your hair;
> You will wake with a start,
> With my voice in your ears
> And an old, old ache at your heart,
> (In the still of the night). (40-45)

In its final line, the poem shifts into a Romantic expression of emotion; the speaker envisions his beloved becoming aware that her pillow is "wet with tears" (46) However, "In the Night Watches" also represents an aesthetic that tries to step aside from and beyond Romanticism by reaching for a modernist perception of human mental processes;

beauty and truth are not to be found in nature, fantasy, or in a new understanding of reality, but in the process of reaching that understanding. Poetry becomes a means of reconstructing both the self in relation to the surrounding environment, and one's relationships with others.

Roberts's shift towards a modernist aesthetic in this poem is echoed by its formal qualities. The stanzas vary from eight lines to twelve. These lines, which also vary in length, are suggestive of free verse. They rehearse older conventions, however. In combination with other metres, they are lines primarily of anapestic trimeter and pentameter. This slow, sing-song rhythm is appropriate for a meditative poem. In the third stanza, like the piercing call of a loon or the sound of a breeze at the cabin door, memories disrupt the speaker's sleep:

> Once and again the loon cries from the lake
> Though no breath stirs
> The ghostly tamaracks and the brooding firs,
> Something as light as air leans on my door. (23-26)

The image is dulled by the ascription of emotions to the trees, but in the fourth stanza similar lines create a sharper and more imagist-like description of a natural scene free of didactic or pathetic comment:

> From the still lake I hear
> A feeding trout rise to some small night fly.
> The splash, how sharply clear!
> Almost I see the wide, slow ripple circling to the shore. (31-34)

The last line of this stanza illustrates another experimental quality in this poem. It is not the poet's subscription to convention that determines the length of the lines in this poem, but a desire to find, as Ross expresses in a letter to Smith, "the right form for the right content, fitting them together to produce something with a new dimension" (14 April 1944, Darling 82). In these four lines, the last one is lengthened as it forms the image of widening ripples. The image is complete within the longer line but that line also qualifies a larger image formed by all four lines:

Of spruce logs my cabin is builded securely;
With slender spruce saplings its bark roof is battened down surely;
In its rafters the mice are at play,
With rustlings furtive and shy,
In the still of the night. (13-17)

The line structure of the poem amplifies the activity it describes: "my long thoughts stab me with longing," the speaker says. As in free verse, form follows content; the poem's images are not fixed in predetermined metres.

Like his use of pathetic fallacy, Roberts's alliteration is a mark of his adherence to conventional prosody. Had he been asked to comment on this poem, Smith would probably have charged it with failing to suggest that Romanticism might be dying out. Smith's Modernism, however, is coloured by elements of Romanticism that linger in such poems of his as those that are published in The Canadian Mercury. Roberts's Romanticism is gently disrupted by experiments that suggest a search for a new aesthetic. In this poem, for example, alliteration underlines images established by experimental lines. The contrast between the sibilant sounds and the harder "b's" emphasizes a tension between resilient trees and a fixed roof. In the last line of the third stanza, with its image of the fish, three stressed words begin with an "s," and an accumulation of "r's" provides an auditory accompaniment to the image of expanding ripples. "In the Night Watches" is the work of a poet who keeps one hand on expressions of a late Romanticism while quietly reaching towards a modernist aesthetic with the other.

II

The New York Nocturnes, published in 1898,[25] has generally been overlooked in critical discussions. At the zenith of Roberts's career, James Cappon's studies, Roberts and the Influence of His Time (1905) and Charles G. D. Roberts (1925), and Archibald MacMechan's book, Headwaters of Canadian Literature (1924), establish a basic critical approach to Roberts's work when they argue that his achievement is represented in his descriptive poetry of the maritime environment. Taking up and developing their argument in his chapter on Roberts in Ten Canadian Poets (1958), Desmond Pacey also acknowledges the significance of Roberts's landscape poetry. In this context, the New York Nocturnes and Other Poems is "completely lacking in distinctiveness of thought or expression" (Pacey 53).

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[25] Eighteen of the poems were published earlier in periodicals, such as The Bookman, a monthly magazine of literature and criticism modelled after the British Bookman; the Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine which serialized Henry James and Jack London; The Chap Book, a Chicago-based magazine in which Carman and Yeats were also published; The Independent, a New York journal with Congregationalist roots and interested in such social issues, such as women's suffrage; Harper's Weekly, an influential, illustrated literary and political journal; Lippincott's Magazine, published in

Roy Daniells, in "Lampman and Roberts," a chapter in Klinck's Literary History of Canada (1965), also picks up Cappon's and MacMechan's argument and adds to it. Roberts's achievement, he argues, lies in a few of his descriptive poems and also in his ability to build a non-Canadian readership for Canadian poetry. Except for a passing reference to "The Solitary Woodsman" (1897), which is one of the "other poems" and not part of the main sequence, he overlooks the New York Nocturnes. As well, W. J. Keith, in his introduction to his edition, Selected Poetry and Critical Prose: Charles G. D. Roberts (1974), finds little of lasting significance in Roberts's poetry. Commenting on "The Iceberg" (1931), he suggests that, "Like his own iceberg [. . .], the mass of his enduring poetry will dwindle"; what may survive will be those poems that hold together the specific details of New Brunswick landscape with faith in a unity of the self, nature, and the transcendent (xxxv). The rest, including New York Nocturnes, will dissolve into an ocean of forgotten poetry.

While focussing their attention on Roberts's landscape poetry, Fred Cogswell, Robin Mathews, and David Jackel develop new lines of critical argument. "Charles G. D. Roberts" (1983), Cogswell's contribution to the poetry series of Canadian Writers and Their Works, investigates the principal ideas that inform Roberts's poetry and fiction.

Philadelphia with a national circulation and which published Oscar Wilde, Rudyard Kipling, and Hart Cane; and Munsey's, a popular New York magazine.

Roberts, he argues, was a mystical poet for whom "poetry was independent of the will in its origins" (216). Curiously, though, except for passing references to two poems in the sequence, "On the Elevated Railway at 110th Street" (1898) and "A Nocturne of Consecration" (1897), Cogswell overlooks the New York Nocturnes with its description of what might be called a poet's mystical quest for ideal beauty.

In his study, Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution (1978), Mathews labels Keith an "Oxbridgean," by which he means a kind of critic who considers Canadian literature belated and derivative, dependent largely on British writers. In Mathews's judgement, Roberts is a strong, Canadian landscape writer. Keith, he contends, renders Roberts a pale imitation of the English Romantics (49-50). His argument that Roberts made "the Canadian landscape habitable for the imagination" (60) arises from a reading of Roberts's landscape poems and historical romances; he makes no comment about the New York Nocturnes and the possibility that it is not only the Canadian landscape that Roberts makes habitable for the imagination. Like Mathews, Jackel is interested in what gives Roberts's poems their "Canadian content." His essay, "The National Voice in Robert's Poetry" (1984), contrasts the specific detail and clear imagery of Roberts's major works with the bombast and trite expression of his overtly patriotic verse (45) and sets his nationalism in the context of the intellectual climate of the day. In Jackel's judgement, Roberts was "a regional poet, never sufficiently conscious of how ill-at-ease (as poet and intellectual) he was outside his region" (50); Jackel does not ask whether the work of a Canadian émigré in New York sustains or contradicts this assessment.

In a critical environment in which Roberts is presented primarily as a landscape and regional poet, his New York Nocturnes receives even less attention than his embarrassing patriotic verse. An exception is D. M. R. Bentley's essay, "Half Passion and Half Prayer" (1984). Discussing the vision of the New York poems and their sequential structure, Bentley argues that New York Nocturnes cannot be dismissed as insignificant because these poems represent "Roberts's attempt to arrive at a vision of sanctified and eternal human love" that reconciles conflicting elements "in his own divided nature" (58). Bentley makes possible a new critical approach to this work by

Roberts, but that approach does not bear directly on the aesthetic exemplified by these poems and their relationship to Canadian Romanticism and Modernism.

According to both Pacey and Keith, the New York Nocturnes belongs to a period of decline and poetic inactivity that separates two productive periods in Roberts's development. Pacey's and Keith's views of the interval between 1895 and 1925 suggest that these were fallow years. During this time, Roberts lives in New York and London and travels in Europe, but he writes little poetry and what he does write discloses something less than a creative aesthetic. In other respects, however, this was a productive time. Roberts produces his History of Canada (1897) and several historical romances, including A Sister to Evangeline (1898), The Heart of the Ancient Wood (1900), and Barbara Ladd (1902). Another novel, Red Fox (1905), and three collections of short fiction, Earth's Enigmas (1896), The Kindred of the Wild (1902), and The Watchers of the Trails (1904), contribute to the Canadian invention of a new literary genre: modern animal stories. Many of the poems Roberts writes during these years were published in a variety of poetry magazines and then collected in The Book of the Native (1896), The Book of the Rose (1903), and two editions of Poems (1901; 1907). This poetry, for the most part, reflects a decaying strain of Romanticism. If, as Pacey and Keith argue, much of Roberts's poetry fails to deserve enduring attention, it is, nevertheless, important to understand the aesthetic of this poetry if we are to comprehend how New York Nocturnes represents a point of departure towards a new aesthetic.

III

Another of Roberts's poems, "Butterflies" (1896) follows the Romantic vision of finding reflections of a subjective perception in elements of an external natural environment; Roberts's "swarm of butterflies" (5), however, bears little resemblance to Wordsworth's field of golden daffodils. The first stanza finds a hazy, religious significance in a small summer scene. A thrush's song recalls a church bell-tower, while the appearance of butterflies, although they will not be identified until the second stanza, constitutes a prayer for healing from an unspecified wrong. In the second stanza, effusive emotion makes the butterflies a vague metaphor for the soul, or a poet's quest for ideal beauty:

Once in a garden, when the thrush's song,
    Pealing at morn, made holy all the air,
Till earth was healed of many an ancient wrong,
    And life appeared another name for prayer.

Rose suddenly a swarm of butterflies,
    On wings of white and gold and azure fire;
And one said, "These are flowers that seek the skies,
    Loosed by the spell of their supreme desire."

The poem's formal elements reflect a formulaic use of older elements of prosody. It consists of a pair of the crossed-rhymed, iambic pentameter quatrains. The rhymes are predictable (air/prayer, butterflies/skies, and fire/desire), while the language ("Pealing at morn"), word order ("made holy all the air"), and artificial rhythm ("many an ancient wrong") reflect an archaic poetic diction. In the end, this poem is not an emotional response to a new perception of nature, but a silly and anaemic articulation of an obscure ideal. "I wandered lonely as a cloud" (1804) exemplifies Wordsworth's process of tranquilly recalling emotion, but if this process creates a perception of the poet's own subjectivity it is as a result of his direct engagement with elements of nature. The presence of a speaking butterfly in the closing lines of Roberts's poem does not summarize a recollected experience; it turns the speaker into an eavesdropper and a gossip, and the poet into a poseur and versifier in contrast to the skilled poet of "Tantramar Revisited" (1883) and Songs of the Common Day and Ave (1893).

The decayed strain of Romanticism in Canadian poetry often included a facile nationalism; some of the poems Roberts produces in this interim period belong with what Smith would later call "maple fudge." The Native" (1901), for example, lacks the detail and thoughtful meditation of Roberts's New Brunswick poems. As in "Butterflies," the stanzas of "The Native" are quatrains with stale crossed rhymes. The poem reduces conventional prosody and vague elements of landscape to versification, effusive emotion, and a clichéd expression of national identity:

O rocks, O fir-tree brave,
O grass and sea!
Your strength is mine, and you
Endure with me. (29-32)

These lines that alternate between iambic tetrameter and iambic dimeter, a vague notion of strength (what strength do rocks, grass, and sea have in common?), and an undefined courage that is suggested by Roberts's ascription of bravery to a tree, epitomize the version of Romanticism that Canadian Modernism would challenge. During this middle period of his writing career, Roberts served in the First World War and some of the poetry of these years reflects his war experience. Roberts, however, was not a Canadian Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967). "Cambrai and Marne (1914-1918)" (1918) is a heroic narrative poem; "The Summons" (1919) describes a soldier's enlistment as a response of the soul to a call to participate in a clichéd, heroic world of banners and trumpets. "To Shakespeare, in 1916" (1918) enlists Shakespeare in the war against the attackers of the Lusitania, and parrots the archaic form of the second person pronoun:

And surely, too, thou art assured.
    Hark how that grim and gathering beat
Draws upwards from the ends of the earth, –
    The tramp, tramp, of thy kinsmen's feet. (13-16)

As John Caldwell Adams points out in his biography, Roberts participated in the suppression of the Irish Easter Rebellion in 1916 and worked in the Canadian War Records Office in London before serving as a press correspondent with the Canadian Corps in France (124-25). His war poems take seriously the painful and frightening realities of the war, but they do so by recycling, without innovative variations, conventional Romantic prosody and the stock themes of Romanticism: manly heroism, freedom, and death.

Another kind of poem is "Going Over: The Somme, 1917" (1918). Roberts employs lines of iambic hexameter, which are varied by the presence of other metres, in four three-line stanzas and a quatrain; this poem represents a creative engagement with conventional prosody rather than a tired expression of Romanticism. It describes a soldier's last thoughts as he leaps from the relative safety of the trench into deadly gunfire.

> A girl's voice in the night troubled my heart
> Across the roar of the guns, the crash of the shells,
> Low and soft as a sigh, clearly I heard it.
>
> Where was the broken parapet, crumbling about me?
> Where my shadowy comrades, crouching expectant?
> A girl's voice in the dark troubled my heart.
>
> A dream was the ooze of the trench, the wet clay slipping.
> A dream the sudden out-flare of the wide-flung Verys.
> I saw but a garden of lilacs, a-flower in the dusk.
>
> What was the sergeant saying?--I passed it along.--
>
> Did *I* pass it along? I was breathing the breath of the lilacs.
> For a girl's voice in the night troubled my heart.
>
> Over! How the mud sucks! Vomits red the barrage.
> But I am far off in the hush of a garden of lilacs.
> For a girl's voice in the night troubled my heart.
> Tender and soft as a sigh, clearly I heard it. (Roberts's emphasis)

In "Going Over," Roberts, a belated Romantic, tries to emerge from a dying aesthetic and reach for something new. The soldier is conscious of "the ooze of the trench" and "the wet clay slipping" (7) and other horrific details of his environment. It is, however, the voice of his absent beloved that distracts him. Linking him with her, the isolated speaker's imagination transforms realities of nocturnal warfare into a dream--or nightmare--and makes real, instead, a vision of a far-away garden. As he leaps from the trench, probably to his death, the soldier is neither deluded nor disillusioned. He is aware of his surroundings and situation; he knows that the voice he hears is that of his sergeant giving the order to "go over," and he is also conscious of his own thoughts and his responses to that order. "Did I pass it along? I was breathing the breath of the lilacs" (10-11). His is the experience of a decidedly modern alienation; he is aware not only that his body is caught in the mud under the flaring red light of the barrage, but also that his mind is somewhere else. The speaker's thoughts as he "goes over" take us over to a new perspective on the nature of reality. Roberts aestheticises a soldier's experience; the reality of war can be reduced neither to the self-evident observations that war is hell nor to an empty rhetoric of glory, King, country, and God. "Going Over" creates a post-Romantic glimpse into the experience of dissociation.

IV

The shift towards a modernist aesthetic in "Going Over" and "In the Night Watches" is anticipated and developed in New York Nocturnes. Lamson and Wolfe, a Boston firm, published the poems with generous spacing and bound them in a sensual cover of dark green tooled leather on which the title and Roberts's surname are printed in gilt. The format invites readers to a leisurely reading of a poet's quest through a dark night for true love and beauty, and it suggests a belated desire for a central role of poetry in society, the loss of which the Romantics feared and the Modernists mourned.

The poems are arranged in two groups, the second of which consists of fifteen pieces of landscape and meditative verse that include "When the Clover Blooms Again" (1897), "Marjory" (1897), "Ice" (1895), and the often anthologized and widely discussed "Solitary Woodsman." The first group, "New York Nocturnes," consists of seventeen poems, some of which recall elements of a rural setting, but all of which describe the speaker's experience in New York. Formally, this group reflects, as does the second group, premodernist conventions. Couplets and quatrains play with several rhyme patterns and are often arranged in ballad and hymn-like stanzas. These conventions do not seem, however, to have fully satisfied Roberts. "A Nocturne of Trysting" (1898) begins with a three-line stanza and concludes with another of four lines. These lines are irregular in length, but they generally employ iambs in combination with other metres. The first line of each stanza contains four stressed syllables and the third five, while the second and fourth are lines of iambic trimeter:

> So the long day is like a bud
> That aches with coming bliss,
> Till flowers in the light the wondrous night
> That brings me to thy kiss. (4-7)

This poem is not an example of modernist free verse, but it does anticipate Stringer's call by playing freely with the rhythm and length of each stanza. Like "In the Night Watches," "A Nocturne of Spiritual Love" (1898) evokes a speaker's desire for his absent beloved; the quatrains of this New York poem parallel the play, in "In the Night Watches," of lines that alternate between iambic hexameter and iambic dimeter:

> Sleep, sleep, imperious heart! Sleep, fair and undefiled!
> Sleep and be free.
> Come in your dreams at last, comrade and queen and child,
> At last to me. (1-4)

Roberts finally employs the strategies of free verse in "A Nocturne of Consecration," the poem (first published in The Independent in 1897) that closes New York Nocturnes. With its inverted word order ("Content you with the wonder of love" and "If more you should surprise" [78, 80]), and its emotionally charged but imprecise images ("the divine-houred summer stillness," "the sweet air," and "the wise earth" [4, 7, 24]), the poem parrots elements of late Romanticism. None of the eight stanzas, however, are of the same length; they vary from five lines in the closing stanza to seventeen in the preceding one. The length of the lines and the pattern of their rhymes vary as well. The fifth stanza, in which the earth answers the speaker's request for "a new word" from his beloved, exemplifies both Roberts's Romanticism and his flirtation with free verse:

> Said the wise earth--
> "She is not all my child.
> But the wild spirit that rules her heart-beats wild
> Is of diviner birth

And kin to the unknown light beyond my ken.
All I can give to her have I not given?
Strength to be glad, to suffer, and to know;
The sorcery that subdues the souls of men;
The beauty that is as the shadow of heaven;
The hunger of love
And unspeakable joy thereof.
And these are dear to her because of you.
You need no word of mine to make you wise
Who worship at his eyes
And find there life and love forever new!" (40-54)

If the formal elements of New York Nocturnes point, albeit tentatively, towards Modernism, the setting of these poems indicates more clearly Roberts's desire for a post-Romantic aesthetic. The speaker searches for his beloved in an urban environment. Elements of an idealized rural landscape in "The Idea" (1898) (the "moon-white woodland stillnesses / Enchanted by a bird" and "childhood daisy fields" [17-18, 23]) are recollected in an environment of paved streets, train stations, the impersonal relationships of crowds, and artificial lights. New York Nocturnes envisions a world that differs not only from that of the Tantramar marshes or the forest isolation of "The Solitary Woodsman" and "In the Night Watches," but also from the world of "Butterflies" and "The Native."

V

"Great things are done," wrote Blake in "The Rossetti Manuscript," "when Men & Mountains meet; / This is not done by Jostling in the Street" (1-2). The jostling in the streets of Roberts's New York provides the context for a meeting between his speaker and the figure of ideal beauty. The first poem of New York Nocturnes, "The Ideal," functions as the sequence's preface. Not only is it separated from the other poems by the table of contents, a title page, and an epigraph from Plutarch, but it also summarizes the search described in the rest of the poems. "Faint with the city's fume and stress" (5), when hope has become "a tide run low / Between dim shores of emptiness" (2-3), the speaker looks for his beloved and finds her at night. He does not turn to the landscape of New Brunswick to escape "the city's clamour," but carries out his quest in "the city's weary miles," among "city-wearied men" (25-26) that he carries out his quest. The tranquillity and peace he finds, however, can only be described in the language of a remembered rural landscape.

The urban world of New York Nocturnes is not a foretaste of the technological celebrations of Vorticism, which contributors to Blast will voice less than twenty years later, and it does not anticipate Eliot's critique of urban anomie in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917). Neither does it echo Lampman's apocalyptic vision in "The City at the End of Things" (1894) or Roberts's own brooding play of memory and rural landscape in "Tantramar Revisited." Instead, the speaker enters his city to look for a beauty which, like the woman's love in "At thy Voice my Heart" (1898), lifts his life "from the clod" as a lily lifts its head "toward God" (10-12). The paradox of an urban quest and rural memories transforms the city into a garden, a synthesis of the opposition between nature and the artifice of urban areas.

Roberts's idealized beauty is an aesthetic expression of a desire to escape from the weariness and mutability of human experience that he describes, in "At the Railway Station" (1898), as the "Mysteries of joy and woe" (4). Paradoxically, it satisfies an insatiable desire; flowers in a secluded city garden, and the "sweet night" (16) of "Nocturnes of the Honeysuckle" (1898), relieve the "anguish of a vain love" ("My Garden" [1898] 6). In "The Ideal," the figure of an elusive woman answers the desire of the speaker of New York Nocturnes when she touches his lips and the "fevered lids" of his eyes (11, 13); she empowers him to speak of the city and of his quest to find her. Like the traditional invocation of the Muse at the beginning of a poem, "The Ideal" is the preface to New York Nocturnes, but it announces the goal of aestheticising the urban experience, and it moves Roberts's sequence towards Modernism.

Bentley suggests that, functioning regeneratively in the context of an urban weariness, the woman underlines a polarity between nature and city. As a result, "The Ideal" announces the fundamental narrative of the New York Nocturnes: "The speaker's extrication of himself from the psychological snare of the city through the healing and consecrating offices of a love that renovates his 'city-wearied' self by permitting him to remember his pre-urban--which is to say, pre-fallen--self" (62; Bentley's emphasis). The image of the ideal beloved, however, does not so much underline a polarity between nature and the city as it transforms that polarization. The woman's presence brings together the speaker's memories of a rural childhood and his adult, urban experience. His thought of her brings him "A breath from childhood daisy fields," but his sense of her presence reminds him of his encounters with the city and its negative features. Roberts's figure of an ideal beauty serves a different function from that which Bentley proposes. She discloses a process through which Roberts aestheticises the chaos of the city through his expression of the speaker's immersion in, and detachment from, that chaos. The speaker does not extricate himself from the city; he abandons his quest for beauty and consoles himself by memories of the beauty he had known in the New Brunswick landscape. Although "The Ideal" does not embrace urban realities, rural realities can hold only the memories of a sense of beauty once known. Ultimately, in "New York Nocturnes," the poems in the first part of the volume, the figure of ideal beauty eludes the speaker. In his mind, he returns to the landscape of his childhood, but it is only in the city that he senses the presence of beauty now. Romanticism belongs to the past; Roberts's figure in "The Ideal" suggests, hesitantly but clearly, that a modern poetry will have to generate its perspectives on beauty from the stresses and transitory experiences of a changing world.

Roberts's city is a departure from other literary cities. The representation of negative human experience by images of cities and their streets is a literary tradition that reaches back, as John H. Johnston points out in The Poet and the City: A Study of Urban Perspectives (1984), to Juvenal's satires and Virgil's polarization of nature and civilization. This polarization presents poetic images and a moral language in which to juxtapose the phenomena of nature and emerging commercial and industrial societies (xvii). Johnston suggests that Wordsworth's description of London in The Prelude juxtaposes, in a stressful, changing urban landscape, the sensory data of experience with perceptions shaped by imagination (103-04). By contrast, Walt Whitman (1819-92) celebrates the American city in expansive, exuberant lines. A knife-grinder in "Sparkles from the Wheel" (Whitman 514), and "populous pavements" (3) are images of urban vitality.

As in New York Nocturnes, a lonely man wanders through city streets in "The City of Dreadful Night" (1894), a poem by James Thomson (1832-82). Thomson's city is "of Night," he writes, "perchance of Death, / But certainly of Night" (IV.7-8). It is a place without "morning's fragrant breath" where the sun "dissolveth in the daylight fair" (IV.3, 7). It is marked by a "deadly weariness of heart all day" and by recurrent dreams that leave the speaker unable to "Discern that dream from real life" (IV.10, 14):

> For life is but a dream whose shapes return,
> 　　Some frequently, some seldom, some by night
> And some by day, some night and day: we learn,
> 　　The while all change and many vanish quite,
> In their recurrence with recurrent changes
> 　　A certain seeming order: where this ranges
> We count things real: such is memory's might. (IV.15-21)

Thomson's urban figure is not searching for his beloved; rather, he embodies despair and an awareness of a Yeatsian sense that there is no longer a centre, or fixed truth, on which to hold.

Roberts steps aside from these representations of the city. His city is a kaleidoscope of images and emotions. Nothing stands still. Shifting scenes contrast images of an urban environment with those of natural landscapes, and offer expressions of love in the language of prayer. The city is a site of confusion, fear, and weariness, but also of vigour and persistence in a quest for an ideal beauty. These contradictions do not make Roberts's city part of a tradition that polarizes a rejuvenating nature and a demonic, or dehumanizing, city; rather, it is in the energy and contradictions of an urban environment, that beauty is to be looked for and glimpsed.

Roberts continues a positive view of the city after his New York Nocturnes; "A Street Song at Night" (1899) celebrates an urban couple's love:

Here mid the hasting and eddying faces,
Here in the whirl of the crowd,
Where the car lights flame and the windows glare
And the night is white and loud. (260)

Roberts's New York is a place of lights, motion, and paradox. The lovers' solitude is deeper in "the throng"; "Not in the wilderness could [they] be / More wonderfully alone" than they are in the swirling energy and sensations of the city. Similarly, the solitude for which the speaker of New York Nocturnes yearns is not that of the "Solitary Woodsman," who is at home in a rural wilderness, but something to be sought out among the lights and cries of the city. The pavements he walks reflect not only misery, but also joy and vitality. The urban tumult does not drown out his love; it gives rise to it. As "In the Crowd" (1898) exemplifies, it is not in tranquil solitude but in a tumultuous environment that he senses his beloved's presence:

The street is full of lights and cries.
The crowd but brings thee close to me.
I only hear thy low replies;
I only see thine eyes. (5-8)

Her presence is imagined, even mystical; shortly afterwards, however, the speaker finds her among the crying and radiant faces in "At the Railway Station." In the atmosphere of a "jarred, tumultuous air" and "endless haste and change," his fevered eyes meet hers "and Heaven opens" (9, 5, 23).

If the city is a site of life and energy, it is also a place of exile, not from the landscape of Tantramar but from a confident knowledge about the place of beauty. In a poem, such as "In the Solitude of the City" (1898), the lights and voices in the streets enfold the speaker in "the dark of sorrow" (6) and fear. The city of "The Ideal" is a place of "fume and stress" and of "clamour" (5, 15). In "Night in a Down-town Street" (1897), a deserted street becomes a "grim cañon" and a dry "iron channel" (13, 18); it turns the universe into a reflection of his desolation, underscoring the distance separating him from his beloved in the poem's final stanza:

> The narrow heaven, the desolate moon
> Made wan with endless years,
> Seem less immeasurably remote
> Than laughter, love, or tears. (21-24)

The experience of exile generates a new vision. A station of New York's subway is a high point for a modern topographical poem, "On the Elevated Railroad at 110th Street":

> Above the hollow deep where lies
> The city's slumbering face,
> Out, out across the night we swing,
> A meteor launched in space. (1-4)

The city becomes an aesthetic alternative to the natural lights of the night sky:

> The dark above is sown with stars.
> The humming dark below
> With sparkle of ten thousand lamps
> In endless row on row. (5-8)

Tension between the darkness and the city's lights surrounds the lovers neither with fear nor with the commercialized sensuality of a night on the town but with mystery:

> Tall shadow towers with glimmering lights
> Stand sinister and grim
> Where upper deep and lower deep
> Come darkly rim to rim.
>
> Our souls have known the midnight awe
> Of mount, and plain, and sea;
> But here the city's night enfolds
> A vaster mystery. (9-16)

The patter of conventional iambic tetrameter and cross-rhymed quatrains clearly signals the presence of a languishing strain of Romanticism in the twilight years of the nineteenth century, but the poem's declaration that the presence of a mystery vaster than human experience or understanding is not deeply interfused, to paraphrase Wordsworth's poem, "Tintern Abbey" (1798), in a rural landscape (96), but perceived in the turbulence of a modern city. Poets, from Wordsworth to Tennyson and Roberts, have written about experiences of the sublime on mountains, by the sea, or at estuary marshes. Like the lovers waiting for a train, Roberts catches a glimpse in New York Nocturnes of another kind of mystery. His poems offer a glimpse of the realities of modern human experience that cannot be expressed in the language of Romanticism itself.

VI

Roberts's speaker looks for his ideal beauty in the chaos of the city, and, there, he briefly encounters her, not in tranquil recollections of Tantramar. New York Nocturnes has its own precursors in Dante's visions of Beatrice, for example, or in the spiritual and psychological quest for the self in the Dark Night of the Soul (16th cent.) by St. John of Cross (1542-91), and in the dark night of a woman's quest for her beloved in The Song of Solomon of the Hebrew Bible. Its more immediate precursors include Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," in which an otherworldly lady who entraps a knight may be read as a figure for the consuming nature both of love and of poetry, and "The Blessed Damozel" (1850) in which D. G. Rossetti (1828-82) cloaks an idealized love with the religious language of Christianity. The idealized woman of Roberts's New York Nocturnes, as well as the poem's pervasive dreamlike and vaguely religious atmosphere, reflect a continuation of the late Romanticism of Rossetti and other Pre-Raphaelites rather than the poetry of Keats or the vision of Dante, but Roberts's aestheticisation of a modern urban environment pushes the poems not towards a Rossetti-like medievalism, but towards a modernist aesthetic in which the location of beauty is not an assumption but a question.

"When my arms wrap you round," declares Yeats in "He Remembers Forgotten Beauty," "I press / My heart upon the loveliness / That has long faded from the world" (Selected Poems 29). The poem is from The Wind Among the Reeds (1899), a volume that was published a year after New York Nocturnes. Its mood parallels that of Roberts's poems. Both poets express a desire for an ideal beauty in the Pre-Raphaelite language of yearning for a beauty that is absent in the contemporary world, and that creates a dramatic tension between the objects of the poets' quests and the worlds, and words, in which they make their search. Like the elusive beloved in Roberts's poems, a mysterious woman eludes a questing poet in Yeats's "Song of Wandering Aengus," another of the poems in The Wind Among the Reeds:

> Though I am old with wandering
> Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
> I will find out where she has gone,
> And kiss her lips and take her hands;
> And walk among long dappled grass,
> And pluck till time and times are done
> The silver apples of the moon,
> The golden apples of the sun. (17-24)

Images from rural Ireland and Irish mythology and the nationalism of the Celtic Twilight express the idea of an elusive beauty, "long faded from the world."

It may be elusive, but it is a beauty that has not faded from the world of New York Nocturnes. Roberts's juxtaposition of urban and rural images expresses his desire for an alternative to late and decayed versions of the Romantic aesthetic. Beauty is not forgotten but located within the paradoxes of the city. As the speaker embraces his beloved in "In a City Room" (1898), it is not loveliness that fades from the world but the strife and sounds of the city itself:

> O city night of noises and alarms,
> Your lights may flare, your cables clang and rush,
> But in the sanctuary of my love's arms
> Your blinding tumult dies into a hush.
>
> My doors are surged about with your unrest;
> Your plangent cares assail my realm of peace;
> But when I come unto her quiet breast
> How suddenly your jar and clamour cease!

Then even remembrance of your strifes and pains
Diminishes to a ghost of sorrows gone,
Remoter than a dream of last year's rains
Gusty against my window in the dawn.

Roberts's speaker looks for his beloved and briefly meets with her in the chaos of the city and not in the recollections of "woodland stillnesses" or "childhood daisy fields." As the speaker recalls a rooming-house window, lines of iambic pentameter diminish the sounds of the city. The city, however, is not erased but transformed by the beloved's presence in that memory.

When the speaker becomes aware of his beloved's presence in another poem, it is in words that transform the urban realities into a dreamscape. In "Presence" (1898), dusk follows dawn, the hours of transition and uncertainty. Blue waves, birds, flowers, and laughing brooks create a stark contrast to the trains, skyscrapers, chaotic streets, and moving faces of the city:

Dawn like a lily lies upon the land
Since I have known the whiteness of your hand.
Dusk is more soft and more mysterious where
Breathes on my eyes the perfume of your hair.
Waves at your coming break in livelier blue;
And solemn woods are glad because of you,
Brooks of your laughter learn their liquid notes,
Birds to your voice attune their pleading throats
Fields to your feet grow smoother and more green;
And happy blossoms tell where you have been.

Perceiving the presence of his beloved, the speaker is not led to a pastoral setting; instead, he finds colour and sound. The woman is the source of aesthetic qualities that enable the speaker to imagine, even though he is in the city, orchard and ocean, and to envision what lies beyond his experience of darkness and loneliness.

New York Nocturnes continues the prosody of late Romanticism; it also begins to present a post-Romantic perspective on urban experience. The realities of both city and rural landscape do not become, in these poems, the basis for moral polarization or an expression of anomie. Although, in the final analysis, "Presence" lacks the sensory details and mystical reflections of Roberts's nature poems and becomes instead a pale version of the lily-festooned and white-bodied Pre-Raphaelite visions, it establishes a garden in Roberts's city. Cultivated in the juxtaposition of urban and rural images, this garden becomes the figure of an aesthetic for which Roberts searches, and which is not that of a late Romanticism.

VII

"My Garden" consists of eleven rhyming couplets, the iambic pentameter of which, together with their imagery and diction, rehearse the conventions of a premodernist aesthetic. The speaker's words, like his heart, beats with a rhythm that sings of nature's fullness, or "summer-time" (2). While workers "faint with heat" on unshaded city streets at noon, and "forget that ever woods were green" (7-9), lavender, roses, and honeysuckle flower in the moonlight and the speaker "keep[s] tryst" (16) by a fountain, awaiting the promised return of his beloved. It is an exquisite portrait of love among the ruins of Romanticism:

> I have a garden in the city's grime
> Where secretly my heart keeps summer-time;
>
> Where blow such airs of rapture on my eyes
> As those blest dreamers know in Paradise,
>
> Who after lives of longing come at last
> Where anguish of vain love is overpast.
>
> Where men forget that ever woods were green,
> The wonders of my garden are not seen.

Only at night the magic doors disclose
Its labyrinths of lavender and rose;

And honeysuckle, white beneath its moon,
Whispers me softly thou art coming soon;

And led by Love's white hand upon my wrist
Beside its glimmering fountains I keep tryst [sic].

O Love, this moving fragrance on my hair,--
Is it thy breath, or some enchanted air

From far, uncharted realms of mystery
Which I have dreamed of but shall never see?

O Love, this low, wild music in my ears,
Is the heart-beat of thy hopes and fears,

Or the faint cadence of some fairy song
On winds of boyhood memory blown along?

O Love, what poignant ecstasy is this
Upon my lips and eyes? Thy touch, --thy kiss.

The garden is not an idyllic scene in which the speaker extricates himself from the heat and toil of the city. Rather, it is an intersection where an urban environment meets the music of nature. The thought processes of the soldier in "Going Over" enable him to glimpse a garden as real as the battle around him, while those of the speaker of "In the Night Watches" displace the isolation of a forest cabin and of the space and time that separates him from his beloved. The apposition of the harsh realities of the city with the equally real, and equally urban, experience of a garden breeze in a summer evening generates a glimpse of the absent beloved.

The glimpse is almost not enough, however; the speaker voices his doubts about the significance or reality of his experience. Is his imagination in this garden shaped by childhood memories, the fantasies of the Celtic Twilight, or Pre-Raphaelite medievalism? The uncertainty voiced by these doubts foregrounds the delicacy and ephemeral quality of human experience; the glimpse is enough. Like Ross's poems, this poem's vision of the fragmented, passing nature of human experience is an aesthetic perspective on the nature of reality, a perspective missed by a decayed Romanticism's vague images and allusions to universal ideals of love, nature, or beauty. Like "Going Over" and "In the Night Watches," "My Garden" creates an imaginative process that seeks a new perspective on the nature of reality, and brings the reader into a relationship with that reality that is not accessible through instrumental reasoning or ethical discourse.

The relationship of urban citizens with nature was also reconfigured by New York's Central Park, a project begun in 1858 and completed in 1877, two decades before New York Nocturnes. The park's designer was the influential American landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted (1822-1903), whose vision was informed by Virgil's Georgics. Penelope Hobhouse, in her study Plants in Garden History (1992), points out that, in the second half of the nineteenth century, eighteenth-century designs dominated England and boulevards were being laid down in Paris. Olmsted, who was also a leading conservationist, "created pastoral scenes in city parks for the relief of the workers" (272). Central Park does not offer relief by taking people out of the city and into natural landscapes; rather, it brings those landscapes into the city. If nature is transformed aesthetically when arranged as a park, the city is equally transformed. It becomes what is constituted at the intersection of street and park, of permanent buildings and transitory flowers, and of flowing traffic and moving water in pools or fountains. Roberts's secret garden is a similar aesthetic transformation.

The garden is also the means by which, in his mind, the speaker leaves the city and looks to elements of a rural landscape for meaning. In the final poem, "A Nocturne of Consecration," the speaker addresses his beloved in her renewed absence. He is "Alone with dreams and memories" of her (3) and, although he speaks to her as though she were present, what he tells her consists of fragments from conversations with the earth and the sky. Bereft, the speaker finds consolation, not from the city's lights, but from the stars who adjure him to find meaning in the transitory quality of his experience:

> be wise.
> Content you with the wonder that lies
> Between her lips and underneath her eyes.
> If more you should surprise,
> What would be left to hope from Paradise? (77-81)

As the speaker turns for consolation to an idealized nature, Roberts returns to a premodernist polarization of an alienating city and a mystical, healing, natural world. Roberts's poem is reminiscent of his earlier poems and those of his Victorian near-contemporary, Tennyson. His speaker, in "A Nocturne of Consecration," however, begins his quest by undertaking a search for beauty among the changing scenes and motions of the city, and in the experiences of its contradictions; this search anticipates Ross's modernist aesthetic. Even as the final poem in this narrative sequence begins to play with free-verse experimentation, however, it returns to the desire of late Romanticism to place beauty in "other worlds" that neither fate nor time, nor the experience of change, will alter.

VIII

Roberts's acquiescence to a premodernist aesthetic in his poems set in an urban chaotic environment means that, unlike Pratt, he cannot be counted a transitional Modernist. New York Nocturnes perpetuates a tired version of Romanticism. Paradoxically, however, these poems anticipate an element of Ross's modernist aesthetic, namely, a consciousness that poetry cannot fix within its lines the transitory and fragmentary qualities of experience which those lines manage to glimpse. Ultimately, "A Nocturne of Consecration" is a confession that Roberts's aesthetic is inadequate and cannot express the perception of beauty for which he searches in New York Nocturnes; it is a confession, however, that anticipates a new aesthetic, one which Eliot tries to articulate in the fifth section of "Burnt Norton" (1936):

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes, break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still. (13-17)

The poems of New York Nocturnes are twilight poems, hovering in a moment of transition between a late Romantic aesthetic and early expressions of Modernism. The concept of the nocturne is an appropriate one from which to create the forms and expressions of these poems. A short, Romantic form of music, the nocturne suggests a night scene and is usually, but not always, quiet and meditative. As Maurice Brown points out in his contribution to The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (1980), the nocturne, although rooted in an eighteenth-century form, the Italian notturno, expresses "subjective and profound emotion" (258). Perhaps the greatest expressions of this form of Romanticism in music are the nocturnes of Frederick Chopin (1810-1849) who, using the piano to express a variety of emotions, developed the nocturne into a form displaying "a more dramatic intensity than their title would suggest" (258). Roberts's New York poems are set at night and are reflective pieces. Excitement, grief, and quiet reflection provide dramatic moments in his narrative of the quest for ideal beauty.

Formally, the nocturne is an appropriate musical model for Roberts's poems. In his contribution to an article on Chopin in the New Grove Dictionary of Music, Nicolas Temperley describes the musical texture of the nocturne. It "isolates a right-hand melody, allowing the fullest possible expression in its playing, while the left hand, assisted by the pedal, provides the entire rhythmic and harmonic background in broken chord accompaniments" (Hedley 301). New York Nocturnes parallels this contrast. Conventional prosody, together with the Pre-Raphaelite elements of an elusive female figure, an abundance of flowers, and religious language, are accompanied by some experimental prosody and images of an energetic urban environment. Roberts's nocturnes reflect, on the one hand, features of late Romanticism and, on the other, a desire for a post-Romantic aesthetic.

This is not Cogswell's argument, but his brief description of Roberts's attitude to the city does point to it:

> It is difficult to move from a settled domestic life among friends in a small town to vagabondia in a large city; in consequence, many of Roberts's poems towards the close of the nineteenth century reflect loneliness, alienation, and the pain of separation from a more rural world. Yet even here, Roberts did not wax indignant and rail at his unlucky lot as Lampman did in a similar situation in Ottawa. He is able to escape from city pressures in "Brooklyn Bridge" and "On the Elevated Railway at 110th Street" and to demonstrate in his beautiful poem "Monition" that even New York, like Francis Thompson's London, was "no strange land" to the receptive spirit. (215-16)

If New York Nocturnes is not, in genre, time, or place, Morley Callaghan's That Summer in Paris (1963) or John Glassco's Memoirs of Montparnasse (1970), or the modernist poetry of their Montreal and Toronto contemporaries, Smith, Scott, and Klein, these poems number among the precursors of these later works for they illustrate an aesthetic in which the search for beauty takes place in contradictory experiences of an urban environment. If attention to precise detail and imagery are the benchmark of poetry, critics are right to set the New York Nocturnes aside; these poems repeat vagaries of a decayed strain of Romanticism and use the flora of the Pre-Raphaelites rather than elements from the New Brunswick landscape. Because New York is not the Tantramar marshes and, because the city prompts a different set of emotions, Roberts's poems require another language or at least a dialogue of several voices, premodernist and modernist. Among these voices we hear not only the poet of "Tantramar Revisited" and "The Solitary Woodsman" but also the conflicting expressions of Romanticism and of a desire for a new aesthetic.

CHAPTER 5

"IT'S NOT THE WAY YOU THOUGHT IT WAS":
PURDY'S AESTHETIC IN NORTH OF SUMMER

> You've never seen this country
>
> it's not the way you thought it was
>
> Al Purdy, "The Country of the Young"

At first glance, Purdy's poems seem to have little in common with those by Ross. Ross's work belongs, with that of his contemporaries in the McGill movement, to the beginnings of Canadian Modernism and its desire to excise from Canadian poetry the influence of late Romanticism. The formal elements of Purdy's poems, together with his colloquial speech and his iconoclastic satire and parody, place him closer to the experiments of poets who might well be described as transitional Postmodernists, the Beats and the Black Mountain poets,[26] but from whom he distanced himself, than to the impersonal and metaphysical Modernism of the McGill poets. His fragments of dialogue, rambling lines, broad scenes, and vital human figures, create a poetry that appears to be as distant from Ross's short, sparse lines, images of small objects, and spiritualist, Petrarchan sonnets as Whitman's poems are from those of Emily Dickinson (1830-86). Like Ross, however, Purdy is keenly aware of the mutability of reality and the transitory quality of human experience and, like that of Ross, his is a paradoxical modernist aesthetic; the truths created in his vision of the Arctic in North of Summer are limited, but that limitation holds out the promise of revised or amplified understanding. As Roberts's collection, New York Nocturnes, anticipates Ross's paradoxical aesthetic, Purdy's volume, North of Summer, develops it further.

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[26] The Beat movement was a group of American writers, centred in San Francisco and New York, who came to prominence in the 1950s and who influenced popular culture and the counter-cultural movement with their provocative attacks on the middle classes of North America and their bohemianism. Among its figures are Lawrence Ferlinghetti (b. 1920), Allen Ginsberg (1926-97), and Jack Kerouac (1922-69). The Black Mountain poets were another, but more philosophical, movement in the United States in

North of Summer is a sequence of poems that document Purdy's sojourn on Baffin Island in 1965. They describe the arctic landscape, the people he meets, and his self-consciousness as an outsider among the Inuit. It is a contribution to a long-standing Canadian tradition of poetry about the North. In his essay, "Tracing One Discontinuous Line through the Poetry of the Northwest Passage" (1996), MacLaren summarizes that tradition as it emerges through the paradoxical images of the North and the Northwest Passage in the journals and poetry of arctic explorers:

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the 1950s. Reflecting a diversity of style and interest, they were anti-academic and sought a poetry that, free from established conventions and a reliance on printed type, emerges spontaneously and reflects the natural rhythms of breathing. Among these poets are Robert Creeley (b. 1926), Robert Duncan (b. 1919), Denise Levertov (b. 1923), and, at the centre, Charles Olson (1910-70). Duncan and the ideas of the Black Mountain poets were significant influences in the founding and development of Tish (1961-69), a Vancouver-based group of Canadian poets that included Frank Davey (b. 1940), George Bowering (b. 1935), and Fred Wah (b. 1939).

> It is empty, desolate, and silent, yet lines have been drawn across it, lines full of promise--promise for spiritual rebirth, for technological innovation, for the realization of national, corporate, and personal desire; its illusiveness yielded a passage that is not much of a passage at all; there is an ocean, but it is frozen. It is the testing ground for and the graveyard of independence. (9)

Purdy's vision of the North in North of Summer departs from this tradition. Baffin Island is not an empty or particularly silent environment. For Purdy, the Inuit who live there are neither the invisible people overlooked by forces of economic and political development nor curious objects for anthropological study. Rather, the people he meets have their own history. In "Innuit [sic]" (1967), for example, Purdy catches a glimpse of "shadowy figures" from "the Dorset and pre-Dorset Cultures / 5,000 years ago" (l. 507) in the eyes of a soapstone carver in the Frobisher Bay co-op. It is also a painful history:

> the race-soul has drawn back
> drawn back
> from settlements and landing fields
> from white men
> into secret vaults
> and catacombs of marrow
> bone rooms
> that reveal nothing. (8-15)

Withdrawal and silence are not the only responses the Inuit make to an invading culture.

Purdy's travel guides and companions, like the figure in "Eskimo Hunter (New Style)" (1966), freely make use of elements of southern technology as they struggle with the elements of their own environment:

> In terylene shirt and suspenders
> sun glasses and binoculars
> Peterborough boat and Evinrude motor
> Remington rifle with telescope sight
> [he is] making hot tea on a Coleman stove
> scanning the sea and shore for anything
> that moves and lives and breathes. (1-7)

In Purdy's North, the indigenous people have lived much longer with the land than he and other outsiders have, and with a greater understanding that sometimes shows itself at his expense. Purdy develops his understanding of the Arctic and of himself as a wandering poet. His journey to Baffin Island is the occasion of his own development of the paradoxical aesthetic identifiable in Ross's northern sensibility and poetry.

Purdy travelled to Baffin Island with, as he recalls in his autobiography, Reaching for the Beaufort Sea (1993), a certain amount of bravado and with questions about his own abilities as a poet:

> [t]he Canadian Arctic was where I first took my ego in my hands and said to the Canada Council, I can write poems there. When you experience that blindingly white place of sunlight, vivid blue water and solitude that presses on you and surrounds you like air itself--you wonder at your own

> hubris and insolence in thinking that you can write about it. (262)

In hindsight, Purdy regarded the years 1965 and 1966 as "a demarcation or bench mark." What lay on one side of the bench mark were the years of what Purdy calls "an apprenticeship, an uncertain testing of my footing, a mysterious waiting period" (189), a period that includes the publication of Poems for All the Annettes (1962) and The Cariboo Horses (1965). His arctic travels feature centrally in this "bench mark" period, in part because Purdy understood his poems to mark a new departure in Canadian poetry. "No other poet I knew of," he argues in Reaching for the Beaufort Sea, "had ever gone to the Arctic (except Robert Service, and he didn't count)." Seemingly unaware of other poems about the North,[27] Purdy had read early exploration accounts, and, in the volume's third poem, "The North West Passage" (1966), he distinguishes his own journey from those of Sir Martin Frobisher (1539-94), James Cook (1728-79), and Sir John Franklin (1786-1847). In her essay, "The Ivory Thought" (1993), Lorraine York proposes that Purdy's vision of the North is that of "a huge, white narcissistic playground, passively offering up to us the image of own imposing selves" (48-49), but the world of North of Summer is full of colour and far from passive. In Purdy's view, there is a vast silence, not in the northern landscape but in Canadian poetry about the North. Until he writes his poems, it remains "virgin territory [. . .] untouched except for the mundane prose of explorers and scientists" (190). Purdy's encounter with its ancient landscape and indigenous people leads him to offer images of an intruding poet who, although often humiliated and frustrated, discovers that Arctic realities force him to reconsider his ideas and his approaches to writing poetry. The aesthetic that emerges in North of Summer is a process of simultaneously engaging with the people and landscape of the Canadian Arctic and distancing himself from them as an intruder. As the poems of Ross do with a more southerly version of the North (represented by northern Ontario), Purdy's poems generate an understanding of the Arctic that cannot be perceived through historical or scientific investigations. Further, although truth of the Arctic cannot be reduced to poems about it, it can be glimpsed through them. Like Ross's, Purdy's aesthetic is a paradoxical one.

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[27] Two articles by MacLaren, "The Poetry of The 'New Georgia Gazette' or 'Winter Chronicle'" (1992) and "Tracing One Discontinuous Line," discuss verses Thomas James (c1593-c1635) included in his book about his explorations in the Arctic, Strange and Dangerovs Voyage (1633), and the poetry published in the shipboard newspapers produced during the 1819-20 expedition led by Sir William Edward Parry (1790-1855). As MacLaren argues, it appears that, to Purdy, "the idea of explorer-poets seems as foreign as the idea of astronaut-poets" ("Tracing" 15). Purdy also ignores two poems by Ralph Gustafson (1909-95). In "On the Yukon Run" (1960), Gustafson juxtaposes the colours of a sunset viewed from the airplane in which he travels with thoughts about on-going gold mining; his sonnet, "In the Yukon" (1960) describes the northern landscape at ground level.

North of Summer consists of thirty-two poems that document Purdy's visit to Baffin Island.[28] Between the table of contents and a poetic foreword, or "Prelude Poem" (1966), eight colour plates reproduce paintings of Baffin Island by A. Y. Jackson (1882-1972), and serve as a visual preface to Purdy's collection. The volume concludes with a postscript that gives one account of its origin. Its title is taken from "Still Life in a Tent" (1967), a poem that describes a guided camping trip during which Purdy becomes ill and his "thoughts travel together / in fevered fantasy / North of summer" (ll. 63-65). He envisions himself travelling "with ham sandwich and thermos / to find the court of the Seal-King" (80-81). His delusions, fear, and disorientation are not symptoms of an inconvenient affliction but signposts of a poetic journey that generates a new understanding of what it means to be in the North:

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[28] Most of the poems were published in journals in 1966 and 1967. Fifteen of them were published in Beaver, Prism International, and The Tamarack Review, and five others in Canadian Literature and Evidence. Sixteen are reprinted in The Collected Poems of Al Purdy (1986).

> I'm so glad to be here
> with the chance that comes but once
> to any man in his lifetime
> to travel deep in himself
> to meet himself as a stranger
> at the northern end of the world. (94-99)

Purdy's vision of the Arctic is an aesthetic one; it creates a landscape shaped by the rhythms and images of poetry. In the lines from "Innuit" that are quoted above, for example, repetitions of "drawn back" and "from" emphasize the retreat withdrawal of aboriginal culture before white settlements. In those lines, and in the ones quoted earlier from "Eskimo Hunter" and "Still Life in a Tent," the predominantly iambic lines that are varied by the use of trochaic and anapestic substitutions undergird an apparently informal, colloquial conversation with a subtle, rhythmic structure. In this carefully crafted, poetic vision, knowledge of the Arctic is always circumscribed and results in the poet's self-consciousness. The result is not a tortuous or disingenuous deconstruction of knowledge but a celebration of the presence of aesthetic possibilities.

The first section of this chapter proposes that North of Summer represents a turning point in the development of Purdy's aesthetic vision. His vision of the North is a shift away from that of the first generation of Canadian Modernists. To highlight the uniqueness of Purdy's vision, section two discusses Scott's poems about the Mackenzie Delta and Smith's modernism as it is exemplified in three of his poems about trees. Purdy's own poem, "Trees at the Arctic Circle" (1967), is the subject of the third and final section, for in this poem can be seen the paradoxical aesthetic that Purdy shares with Ross and that he develops in his own way.

I

Purdy regarded North of Summer as a turning point in his development as a poet; it also represents a new way of looking at the North. In "The Turning Point" (1966), the poem that opens the collection, it is not the future of the land that is at stake but the poet's imagination and his ability to find an aesthetic vision of that land. His flight to Baffin Island is marked by a self-conscious misunderstanding of the North in literary and personal contexts. Suzanne, the flight attendant, points to the predawn light visible through the window and tells Purdy that, sometimes, she sees "angels out there." "Human angels?" he asks her and she laughs. "I must have said the wrong thing," he confesses (15-19). A Romantic vision of the North is not available to Purdy. Baffin Island is a name he has remembered "since childhood," but already he understands that it is "most unlike Cathay or Paradise," the Romantic Orientalism and other descriptions he recalls from books he used to read (36-41). It is also colder than he had anticipated: "I guess / the Arctic is no place for shirtsleeves" (19). However, fanciful images will not help him generate the truth of an environment he approaches as both a traveller and a poet. His perceptions of the hard realities of this environment, and of his own limitations, begins to shape his aesthetic struggle.

In Pangnirtung, a hamlet on Baffin Island about three hundred kilometres north of present-day Iqaluit (or Frobisher Bay, as it was called when Purdy visited it), Purdy begins his journey. "Eskimo Graveyard" (1967) is a good point of departure for a discussion of North of Summer because Purdy's peripatetic observations of the Arctic in this poem exemplify his aesthetic vision of the North. He begins his walk in the company of a "Public Works guy" (8), who takes him through the "glacial litter" of "an old river delta" (1) to a cemetery where "you always find good gravel for concrete" (9) and where Purdy sees the body of an old woman "wrapped in blankets / above ground" (13-14). Leaving behind the Public Works employee who stops to talk with the construction foreman, Purdy walks towards "the tents of The People" (35) and, later, to a point beyond the Inuit community, where he has a view of the headlands of the Pangnirtung Fjord. His perspectives on both the community and the landscape are self-consciously aesthetic; he gazes at the community in the distance as if it were a painting or a photograph. In "one corner of the picture" (37) that he constructs, he places images of pride and affection:

> Mothers with children on their backs
> in the clean white parkas
> they take such pride in
> buying groceries at H. B. C.

> boys lounging under the store
>
> in space where timber stilts
>
> hold it above the permafrost
>
> with two of them arm in arm
>
> in the manner of Eskimo friends. (38-46)

The image is painted by a sentence that rambles through nine iambic lines, much as Purdy rambles through the town site. Later, Purdy feels that "something ought to happen" (61) in another corner of his picture where the summer sun is "stretching / a yellow band across the water / from headland to black headland" (63-65). The internal rhyming of "band" and the repeated word, "headland," add a mellifluous note to descriptions of life in the community and of drama in the landscape.

The images, however, are coloured by his earlier moment in the graveyard; both scenes recall the dead woman lying above the frozen ground. The store under which boys are lounging stands above the permafrost. Purdy's scene appears natural, but it is also a reminder of the woman whose body, not yet interred, lies above the frozen ground in the cemetery. These boys, and mothers who are occupied with their own daily concerns, lead Purdy's mind "to think of the old woman / neither wholly among the dead / nor quite gone from the living" (49-51). He wonders "how often / a thought of hers enters the minds / of people she knew before" (52-54). Purdy had arrived at the cemetery from the river delta; with the evidence of enduring geological time behind him, he wonders if the transitory quality of human life can be countered by the memories of the living. Viewing the sun above the headlands, he thinks that "something" should take place; what does happen is that his mind shifts from the "yellow band" of sunlight stretched across the inlet to a sense that the settlement is sealed in "as if there was no way out" (68). His next thought is about "That old woman" (72); like the community, which is seemingly closed in by the sun on the horizon, or like the bodies buried in glacial gravel, human life is contained within the broader sweep of geological forces and time. Thinking of the woman, Purdy wonders "about human bookkeeping," or the "debits and credits" (75-76) that symbolize the relationship between memory and mutability, and between a transient visitor and his poetic observations. Recalling her, Purdy arrives at one more image:

> the sealed white tents
> like glowing swans
> hoping
> for a most improbable
> birth. (79-83)

"Eskimo Graveyard" is a deliberate expression of a modernist aesthetic. It generates an aesthetic truth about a poet's visit to the community that could not be apprehended through the instrumental reasoning of Public Works Canada, for example. The hope for an "improbable birth," which the swanlike tents evoke, suggests what the poet thinks should happen: the old woman in the cemetery should be reborn in the memories of the community. Purdy's image is also an expression of his desire to generate, through the poem's aesthetic construction of Pangnirtung's setting and people, a unique understanding of Canadian nature and life.

In poems such as "H. B. C. Post" (1967) and "At the Movies" (1966), Purdy criticizes white intrusion in the North. This criticism accompanies his attempts to understand aesthetically what he calls, in "The Turning Point," the "full shape of the Arctic" (20) as he imagines its inhabitants see it. In "Canso," for example (the title refers to a commercial airplane), he rewrites modern technology in the language of Inuit mythology. The plane, which "Swung by the heels like / Achilles" (1-2) of Western myth and epic, approaches an island known by ancient Dorset and Thule cultures, while a figure from aboriginal mythology, "Sedna / the mother of all sea mammals," waits below in the sea (20-21). Canadian development of the Arctic has its own Achilles heel; its strong presence is vulnerable not only to the challenges of a living, indigenous culture but also to a poet's aesthetic perception of the North and his own self-mockery as a representative of southern Canada. Purdy's self-consciousness precludes a literary form of colonialism, and the naive assumption that he understands the Inuit and can appropriate their perspectives on the world. As he walks through Pangnirtung and wonders how often the dead woman's own thought "enters the minds / of people she knew before" ("Eskimo Graveyard" 53), he also wonders how often "thoughts of [him] occur to the mosquitoes" (58-59); his poem gently laughs at both his presence on the island and at his thought processes. Purdy's self-mockery in "Eskimo Graveyard" expresses a paradoxical aesthetic. He is aware that the knowledge he creates of the Arctic is also limited.

This paradoxical aesthetic is reflected also in "When I Sat Down to Play the Piano" (1966). The laughter is less than gentle as the poem presents a moment when, squatting in "a quiet glade among great stones" (6), he finds himself surrounded by "a dozen dozen [sic] fierce Eskimo dogs / with an inexplicable [. . .] appetite / for human excrement" (24-25), while a child throws stones at the animals and laughs at him. The poem's euphemistic title and the hyperbole generated by "glade," a word that belongs to earlier pastoral poetry, contribute to the humour by which the poem undermines the poet's imposing self. "When I Sat Down to Play the Piano" pokes fun at a poet who, unlike the heroic Pierre in Scott's "Fort Smith," loses his dignity in his bodily struggles:

> I shriek
>
> and shriek
>
> (the kid laughs)
>
> and hold onto my pants
>
> sans dignity
>
> sans intellect
>
> [. . . . .]
>
> and damn near sans anus. (40-47)

The joke is on the culture of southern Canada. Purdy employs iambic metre to describe his humiliation and the cadences of the Authorized Version of the Bible to aestheticise "the most natural of natural functions" (10):

> He cometh forth hurriedly from his tent
>
> and looketh for a quiet sequestered vale
>
> he carrieth a roll of violet toilet tissue
>
> and a forerunner goeth ahead to do him honour
>
> yclept a snotty-nosed Eskimo kid. (1-5)

His parody of Biblical prosody, especially that of Psalm 23, in combination with sarcastic references to the advice columns and heroic attorneys of popular culture ("Dear Ann Landers / what would you do? Dear Perry Mason / what would you do?" [27, 29]), criticises a southern culture that tries to invade the North. In the context of his contest with nature on Baffin Island, Purdy shouts that these traditions offer "NOT A DAMN THING" [sic] (32).

On Baffin Island, Purdy finds himself incapacitated on more than one occasion. He is caught in an awkward situation in "When I Sat Down to Play the Piano," and he is laid low with fever while on a camping trip in "Still Life in a Tent." Purdy's North is strong and resilient; it is not, as in it is Scott's poem, "Mackenzie River" (1963),[29] a "bleak" and "bare" landscape (33). The old woman in "Eskimo Graveyard" is laid to rest on top of the frozen ground, but willow bushes in "Trees at the Arctic Circle" send their roots down into the ground:

> about 2 feet under
> those roots must touch permafrost
> ice that remains ice forever
> and they use it for their nourishment
> use death to remain alive. (38-42)

In "Arctic Rhododendrons" (1967), the North is the location of an evanescent beauty whose death nourishes the memories of lovers:

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[29] Quotations of Scott's work rely on The Collected Poems of F. R. Scott (1982).

flowers were their conversation
and love the sound of a colour
that lasts two weeks in August
and then dies
except for the three or four
I pressed in a letter
and sent whispering to you. (20-27)

The poems that express Purdy's North create knowledge of the world he encounters and of himself. In Reaching, he claims that "there's a shadow self I'm trying to get in touch with, the other self who lives in all of us, friend, foe or neutral judge" (189). Purdy argues that human beings must "invent or discover" their own existence. He is offering here neither a Nietzschean will nor a contemporary conservative notion of the self-sufficiency of the individual. In the opening paragraphs of "Anecdotage," the final chapter in his autobiography, he argues that the "doppelganger of the soul," that other self he tries to get in touch with, "doesn't exist. Therefore I invent him" (189). Purdy's responsibility, then, is aesthetic. What emerges from his visit to Baffin Island is a self-conscious engagement with the world and his aesthetic transformation of it.

Like Romanticism, Waugh argues, Postmodernism is faced with the problem of "how to separate the object to be observed or studied from the critical discourse which in some sense constructs it" (12). Given her argument about its relationship to both Romanticism and Postmodernism, Modernism must also wrestle with this question. Purdy's answer is to laugh at himself and at his perceptions in his poems. The poet of

North of Summer is conscious of himself as an outsider in the northern landscapes and its communities, and about his struggles to understand "the full shape of the Arctic." His self-awareness becomes a conscious understanding of both the reality he perceives and the real nature of his poetry by which he constructs those perceptions. In his poems, Ross is acutely aware of the limited abilities of poetry to express the truths it perceives in a mutable world; when Purdy pokes fun at himself, he follows Ross's aesthetic even as he replaces Ross's gravity with his humour. He also takes it a little further. It is not the fleeting and fragmentary nature of the world, or the limited abilities of poetry to express them that Purdy points to, but the limitations of the poet himself. Purdy's paradox is that his self-conscious awareness of those limitations accords him the freedom to rewrite his poems and develop further his own aesthetic vision of the North and the act of writing poetry about it.

II

There are other traditions of writing about the Arctic; they cannot be charged with doing "not a damn thing" in their representations of the North, but they can be questioned. North of Summer, to paraphrase Roberts, takes hold of the aesthetic of an earlier generation of Canadian Modernists, and steps beyond it. Smith's first version of "The Lonely Land" (1926) was dedicated to the Group of Seven; it links the McGill movement with the innovative visions of early modernist painting in Canada. Purdy dedicates North of Summer to Scott. When McClelland and Stewart brought out the volume in 1967, it included reproductions of paintings that Jackson had done during his own trip to Baffin

Island, and which had appeared earlier in a number of the centennial year issues of the Hudson's Bay Company magazine, The Beaver. The North that Purdy's poems construct differs from the trees in Smith's earlier poems and from the North in Scott's poems, written in the 1950s and 1960s, about the Mackenzie Delta. The paragraphs that follow will explore some of these poems by Smith and Scott in order to better understand Purdy's unique vision of the North. This discussion begins with Purdy's response to Jackson's paintings, for it is a response that indicates Purdy's desire to move away from the aesthetic of the first generation of Modernism in Canadian poetry.

In a letter to Margaret Laurence (1926-87), Purdy writes that Jackson's paintings seem to turn his collection into "a sort of art book," which guarantees that McClelland, whom he does not like, "can't very well use anything but good paper" (2 February [1967]; Lennox 9).[30] He values the paintings not for their artistic qualities, but because their presence will improve the appearance, and sales, of North of Summer. In another letter to Laurence two months later, Purdy is less restrained in his opinion of Jackson's work. "I think they're terrible," he writes, "and Jackson is a study in retarded development" (20 April [1967]; Lennox 19-20). While Jackson may be alive "technically," he adds, his paintings suggest that "he passed to his last reward about 1920" (8 May [1967]; Lennox 24). Jackson was very much alive, however. The paintings to which Purdy takes exception resulted from his second visit to Baffin Island, a journey he made the same year that Purdy travelled there. Purdy's ad hominem attack notwithstanding, what emerges from his reaction to Jackson's paintings is a strong desire to break with the earlier modernist aesthetic (and an unpeopled North) that they exemplify.

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[30] References to Purdy's letters include the date of the letter and the page on which it may be found in Margaret Laurence--Al Purdy: A Friendship in Letters, edited by John Lennox, and in The Purdy-Woodcock Letters, edited by George Galt.

The Group of Seven's Modernism, as Charles Hill reminds us in The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation (1995), was a struggle to reconstruct a landscape that had been painted with premodernist European colours and subjects (20). At the same time that the McGill poets were engaging with Anglo-American Modernism, Jackson wanted Canadian painters and collectors to expose themselves to modernist art in order break the hold of established conventions in Canadian painting. In "Up North" (1927), for example, an account of his first visit to the Arctic that was published in The Canadian Forum, he suggests that Baffin Island offers the same opportunities for new developments in Canadian painting that Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) had found in the islands of the South Pacific (480). Two years later, in "The Royal Canadian Academy" (1929), which appeared in The Canadian Mercury, Jackson reviewed the Academy's fiftieth exhibition. He acknowledges that the painting world's equivalent to the Canadian Authors Association "does not discourage originality" and that the exhibition includes "bold and solidly painted things" that show "no lack of technical ability" or "liveliness." At the same time, however, he chastises the Academy. Its exhibition "encourages banality," and panders to the tastes of Canadian collectors who ignore contemporary French developments and who prefer, instead, "the obvious inanities" of Dutch painting while overlooking entirely the work of Vincent Van Gogh (1853-90) (54). Jackson, like Smith who dedicated "The Lonely Land" to the Group of Seven, belongs to the first wave of Modernism in Canada; he wants to create a new perspective on Canadian experience.

The figure of Jackson appears in "The Country of the Young" (1966), Purdy's conclusion to North of Summer. Alluding to Jackson's comments, the speaker in Purdy's poem points to the colours in Jackson's paintings of Baffin Island and says that "they're not bright Gauguin / or blazing Vincent" (ll. 16-17). Not only are the premodernist traditions of European art unsuitable to the scene on which Jackson and Purdy gaze, but so is the vision of the first Canadian Modernists. Ross wanted a poetry that reflected "something of the sharper tang of Canada"; Purdy's figure of Jackson takes up that theme. "You've never seen this country," he says, "it's not the way you thought it was[.] / Look again" (7-9). In his Sonnets, Ross had looked back to an earlier aesthetic, but, beyond the use of the Petrarchan form, he could not establish a continuity between it and one more suitable to modern Canadian experience. Purdy, by contrast, finds both continuity and dissociation with an earlier aesthetic. He sets Jackson within his own poem, and he has him speak words that redefine modernist aesthetics even as he creates the paintings Purdy dislikes. The figure of Jackson serves as a metaphor for Purdy's own identification with earlier attempts to create a new understanding of Canadian experience while also moving away from it.

Scott looks at Canada's North and creates two aesthetic visions of it. One is a world we glimpse in "Mackenzie River" which is "so bleak and bare" that "a single plume of smoke" becomes "a scroll of history" (33-36). It belongs "wholly to itself / obeying its own laws" (1-3). Like the melting glacier that, in "Old Song," flows over granite, the Mackenzie River carves into the "stone bed" and flows over "sunken rock"

("Mackenzie River" 10-11). The landscape in "Fort Smith" (1956) is a world on "the edge of the [Canadian] Shield"; it is "polished by ice" and echoes "the roar of the great rapids" (54-56). This poem creates an image of the North from sparse descriptions and hard images in stanzas with groups of three, successively indented lines that suggest both the river's meandering and poems by Williams, the great modernist champion of poetry's contact with local detail. Like a cubist canvas, Scott's river might be described as an image created at the intersection of several planes, those of fluid motion and solid rock, of sea and of fertile deltas:

> The top water   calm
>   moves purposefully
>   to a cold sea
>
> Underneath   its stone bed
>   shows sunken rock
>   in swirl and surface wave
>
> Suspended
>   in its liquid force
>   is the soil of deltas.

In its images and formal elements, "Mackenzie River" exemplifies the aesthetic Scott announces in "Old Song" when he evokes a hard, ancient landscape as the embodiment of a spirit in which he wants to ground a modern Canadian poetry.

"Mackenzie River" is also a dialogue between aesthetic representations of the world and its history. Scott's vast Arctic where a solitary plume of smoke becomes an event is the land of "A river so Canadian / it turns its back / on America" (28-30); Scott's second vision is a political one. The North is a tabula rasa, an empty slate written over by a southern-directed economic development. In its contention with that development, the bleak, silent landscape is transformed into realizable potential. Scott's North is

> An arena
> Large as Europe
> Silent
> Waiting the contest.
>
> Underground
> In the coins of rock
> Cities sleep like seeds. (15-21)

The contest is of epic proportions, and Scott's poems contain lists that, like those in epic poetry, characterize a moment in history by assembling object after object and description after description. A description of cargo ferried to Fort Smith by a Slave River barge in "The Camp at Bell Rock" (1956) exemplifies the invasion of northern Canada by southern technology, economic desires, and political bureaucracy:

> Muckers for mines, acids for ores,
> Barrels of oil and gas, timber and pipe,
> Bull-dozers and cranes, fork-lifts and drills,

Tough hardware, and the fuel of power.
Under tarpaulins are boxes of fruit,
Tinned vegetables, baby-food and oranges,
And one big flashy fire-truck,
Like a huge toy, red and hosy [sic],
With siren, axes and nozzles,
A civic triumph for the new Aklavik
On the Delta, location E3. (44-54)

These elements, not those of the landscape in "Old Song," or the Precambrian Shield, "speak the language of life" (43) in "Canada's colony," as Scott refers to the North in "Fort Smith" (20). The latter poem is a satirical vision of development in the Northwest Territories. Along the town's streets, which are unnamed except for "Axe-handle Road," are outposts of southern life:

There was the Bank of Commerce
In a new tar-paper bunk-house
Opened six days ago,
The Hudson's Bay Store and Hotel,
Government Offices, Liquor Store,
RCMP Headquarters, Catholic Hospital,
Anglican and Catholic Churches,
The Imperial Oil Compound
The Barber Shop and Pool Room,

A weedy golf course, the Curling Club,
And the Uranium Restaurant, full of young people
Playing song-hits on the juke-box.

This list is as poetic as the Yellow Pages, but its bitter humour constitutes its aesthetic value. "Fort Smith" points to a truth that lies beyond the commercialism of the growing town and the empty lives of its inhabitants. Fort Smith is a town in which the Precambrian landscape and aboriginal people are marginalised, but not without irony. Although the original inhabitants live in what others call "the native quarter," on the lawns of the "trim houses of the civil servants" are "tents for children to play Indian in" (35, 39-41). Like "The Canadian Authors Meet" (1927) and "W. L. M. K." (1954), "Fort Smith" is a poem in which aesthetic knowledge illustrates political commentary.

So, too, is "A New City: E3" (1956; 1970), a town alluded to in "The Camp at Bell Rock." A poetic presentation of the opening of a new territorial council in Inuvik is full of irony. Native people who had watched "The slow, inescapable death / Of this land" (2-4) and an American invasion of "the tundra and lakes" also watch the construction of the town, "a bureaucrat's dream" (16), but they are not present for the opening ceremonies (30). In a contest with human development, the natural forces of the North have gained a small victory. The whites-only gathering proceeds without a symbolic parliamentary mace which had been lost among the thriving muskrats of the river delta and in the mud the official had tried to escape by building Inuvik across from it "upon solid rock" (12-14, 41-45).

It is in the ancient landscape outside the growing towns, not in the streets and institutions that signal economic and political development, that a northern beauty can be found. The speaker of "Fort Smith" becomes aware of this beauty when he witnesses his companion in a contest with the Slave River:

> Pierre, suddenly challenged,
> Stripped and walked into the rapids,
> Firming his feet against rock,
> Standing white, in white water,
> Leaning south up the current
> To stem the downward rush,
> A man testing his strength
> Against the strength of his country.

Scott's North is a vast, primordial landscape that becomes a testing ground for Canadian development. It is an aesthetic construction that seconds a socialist vision; the northern environment is the scene of economic development and social criticism.

Purdy's aesthetic vision of the Arctic shares some points of reference with Scott's earlier Mackenzie Delta poems. His observations of the Hudson's Bay Company trader in "H. B. C. Post" and his epic-like list of elements of modern, southern technology in "Eskimo Hunter," for example, parallel Scott's descriptions of technological and economic activity in the Western Arctic. Although Scott expresses his concern about the deleterious impact of northern development, he also views the North as a landscape full of possibilities for Canada's development. Purdy is more sceptical. While in Frobisher Bay, he writes to George Woodcock expressing his concerns about the impact of southern culture on the North. "Eskimos are being changed over," he says, "to beings like us"; contact means the Inuit are being remade as "a bad facsimile of white men" (13 July [1965]; Galt 5).

"H. B. C. Post" illustrates Purdy's concern. Hunters bring their sealskins and furs to a post manager who "explains the reasons behind his price" and "picks out a fault here and another there" (21). Although this economic and cultural exchange "ends with acceptance" (22), the poem does not conclude with an acceptance of commercial culture exemplified by the Hudson's Bay Company:

> [. . .] in the Eskimo's mind I have seen
> clothes for the whole family,
> new rifles with telescopic sights,
> 100 pound sacks of flour and groceries,
> shining marine engines, clean white tents,
> stacked up dream-high in his mind
> come tumbling down-- (24-29)

Scott struggles poetically to understand the contest between a hard, ancient land and twentieth-century development; Purdy contends with himself. Purdy's challenge is not that of Pierre in Scott's "Fort Smith" who pits "his strength / Against the strength" of the river. Nor is his North a testing ground in which, like early explorers, he will try to prove his ability to endure against a harsh and bleak landscape. North of Summer will prove to be a turning point in Purdy's development as a poet. His aesthetic vision emerges in his struggle to understand what he glimpses as the "full shape of the Arctic," a world into which he arrives not as a developer but as an interloper. Purdy's dedication of North of Summer to Scott points to a sense of continuity with his poetry. Like Scott, Purdy wants to look again at northern Canada; he wants, however, to see it in a different way.

Published the same year as North of Summer, Smith's Poems New and Collected contains a sequence of three poems about trees. In "Historied Trees" (1994), Bentley suggests that Smith tries to neutralize a Canadian Romantic tradition regarding the landscape by questioning the idea that nature has something to "say" (10). The first of Smith's three poems, "Birches at Drummond Point," is a brief, imagist lyric that tries to clear away other literary trees. Against a tradition exemplified in poems by Carman and his contemporary, F. J. Sherman (1871-1926), for example, in which birch trees symbolize beauty and represent the idea of art's immortality, the trees in Smith's poem "are birches and 'nothing more'" (10). Uncomplicated colours ("white," "green") and bare adjectives ("slim," "dark") create a simple set of images of trees curved in the wind, their leaves rustling. With a few, terse verbs ("glints," "flashing," "makes"), Smith's stark description underscores a modernist apposition of direct presentations of natural objects with the aesthetic gaze of the poet: "What do they say?" Smith asks (14). Smith's sparse punctuation frees the words to move in the rhythms of lines and images and it permits a terse description of the scene ("Leaning over the lake / slim white birches/ curved by the south-west wind" [1-3]) while line breaks and indentations set up a reading in which the poem questions itself. Twice in the short poem, in the fifth and final lines, three words--"or seem to"--are set off from the rest of the poem. As Bentley suggests, Smith's poem questions the idea that nature has a message for the human intruder. The poet's aesthetic vision does not identify a truth that inheres in the natural world; rather, it creates it. "Birches at Drummond Point" questions the continuation of Romantic visions of Canadian landscape and exemplifies a modernist aesthetic that is self-consciously anxious about its possibilities to interpret the world.

Smith follows "Birches at Drummond Point" with "Tree" (1948), a revision of an earlier poem. It suggests that the language of poetry represents reality denotatively.

> Words are ciphers
> denoting speeds and directions
> not of thought only
> but of things. (1-4)

The next stanza, however, claims for language a power of divine proportions, for here the word is spoken and immediately a world is created.

> I say tree
> and the rain falls
> and the sun gets to work
> and the seed breaks
> and the sprout appears. (5-9)

Polysyndeton, the repeated use of the co-ordination conjunction "and," echoes the poetry of the opening chapter of Genesis. In Smith's poem, the word "tree" doubly reconstructs the world; it "split[s] the earth" with an aged tree, "gray, black, knotted, gnarled" and presents "a boy / carving a heart / and a name" (13-17). In "Birches at Drummond Point," poetry cannot discern what nature says; in "Tree," poetry engages with the natural world and inscribes its meaning on it.

The third poem in the sequence is Smith's 1929 version of "The Lonely Land." A modernist economy reflected in short lines and sparse description produces a prospect poem that echoes impressionist art or the paintings of Emily Carr (1871-1945) in which a foregrounded tree is surrounded by swirling clouds, hills, and trees:

> Cedar and jagged fir
> uplift sharp barbs
> against the gray
> and cloud-piled sky;
> and in the bay
> blown spume and windrift
> and thin, bitter spray
> snap
> at the whirling sky;
> and the pine trees lean one way. (1-11)

With its terse description (the verb "snap" has its own line and "are lost" another) and its verbs of motion ("whirling," "stagger and fall, / and recover"), "Lonely Land" shares the aesthetic landscape with other poems of the day. It is similar to H. D.'s "Oread" (1924):

> Whirl up, sea--
> whirl your pointed pines,
> on our rocks,
> hurl your green over us,

cover us with your pools of fir.

Smith's poem reflects the influence of H. D.'s and, in its turn, seems to influence "Island with Trees" (1928), a poem Ross includes in Laconics:

The trees are bent
away from the north
on this island
in the lake
wind-swept
in all the seasons--
the northern wind
is master here. (1-8)

As in H. D.'s and Ross's poems, nature in "The Lonely Land" contains no inherent truth. Rather, the poem's images create a knowledge of the landscape that endows it with beauty:

This is a beauty
of dissonance,
this resonance,
of stony strand,
this smoke cry
curled over a black pine
like a broken
and wind-battered branch. (23-30)

Scott's "single plume of smoke" in "a land so bleak and bare" echoes Smith's "smoke cry" the a wind-swept landscape. Smith's smoke is not cabin smoke, however; it is a more complicated image constructed through synaesthesia; sound is conveyed through the visual imagery. The duck's cry, a metaphor for loneliness, curls like smoke and, it may be envisioned, with the colours of smoke, over a black pine. Scott's smoke unfolds like "a scroll of history," but Smith's cry is another kind of text. It is not an emblem of the potential development of Canada; it is a sensual evocation of the beauty Smith perceives in the Canadian landscape. Dissonance and resonance are constituted in the contrast between, on the one hand, a transitory duck and moving wind and water, and, on the other, the tenacity of the leaning pines. Smith's vision of pine trees and a wind that "curdles the sky / from the north" is not a response to changes taking place in urban, and urbane, centres in Britain and the United States; it expresses, instead, the "sharper tang" of a Canadian modernist aesthetic. H. D.'s poem reflects the experimental ideas of Imagism in its attempt to reduce its representation of realty to things themselves, an attempt that creates a complex meeting of the subjectivity of the poet with that of the reader. Ross's and Smith's trees are aesthetic objects presented in an objective manner, or what Bentley describes as neutrality.

III

By claiming that the "full shape of the Arctic" was unrepresented in Canadian poetry until his journey to Baffin Island, Purdy rejects earlier, southern constructs of the North. His poems in North of Summer avoid becoming another such construct, in part because they are written in the Arctic and are shaped by Purdy's encounters with a northern landscape and its people. More importantly, North of Summer is not so much a poetic representation of the realities of Arctic Canada viewed by another southern intruder as it is a reflection of the intrusion of the North into Purdy's aesthetic processes. When Purdy returns from Baffin Island to his home in Ameliasburg, Ontario, thoughts of the people he met enter his perceptions of his own world. "Odd things happen," he writes in "Prelude Poem," the epigraph to North of Summer. "Brown men in mukluks climb / the snake fences" along the rural roads and he is afraid "to mention it / at the village store" (1-4, 6-8). In "The Country of the Young," the volume's closing poem, Purdy's figure of Jackson tells him that the North is "not the way you thought it was"; Purdy's epigraph announces that the country around Ameliasburg is also no longer what he thought it was. North of Summer does not only document his arctic journey; it also describes the aesthetic process that emerges from the journey. Purdy's poetry generates a new understanding of the Inuit and their environment, and also of his world.

"Trees at the Arctic Circle" exemplifies Purdy's paradoxical modernist aesthetic. He begins by expressing contempt for bushes that struggle to grow in the harsh environment north of the tree line.

> They are 18 inches long
> or even less
> crawling under rocks
> grovelling among the lichens
> bending and curling to escape

> making themselves small
> finding new ways to hide
> Coward trees
> I am angry to see them
> like this
> not proud of what they are
> bowing to weather instead
> careful of themselves
> worried about the sky
> afraid of exposing their limbs
> like a Victorian married couple. (1-16)

Purdy's thought does not ramble without hindrance; lines of iambic tetrameter interrupt his sentences, creating fragmentary expressions of ideas that pile upon one another. In the structure of these lines, Purdy carefully expresses the problem he recognizes that he has in understanding the North, or the willow bushes that represent it. His perspective is not yet shaped by direct observation of the arctic landscape itself, but by images he has brought with him from the South and from an older aesthetic vision of the Canadian environment, a world of Douglas Firs, maple trees, and "oaks like gods in autumn gold" (17-19). Looking again at the bushes, however, he makes a reassessment. He no longer finds cowardice and Victorian sensibility reflected in their growth, but a hard courage, which he expresses in complete, although unpunctuated, sentences:

their seed pods glow
like delicate grey earrings
their leaves are veined and intricate
like tiny parkas
They have about three months
to ensure the species does not die
and that's how they spend their time
unbothered by any human opinion. (27-34)

What begins as fragmented descriptions of arctic vegetation becomes a mellifluous meditation on the thought processes that generate his poems.

Purdy then decides that, in his initial response to the landscape, he had been "stupid" (53):

I see that I've been carried away
in my scorn of the dwarf trees
most foolish in my judgement.
To take away the dignity
of any living thing
even tho it cannot understand
the scornful words
is to make like itself trivial
and yourself the Pontifex Maximus
of nullity. (43-52)

He had failed to understand the "shape of the Arctic" and to see in it something other than the preconceived images through which he trivialized the landscape. Consequently, he recognizes, it is not the North that is diminished but himself as a poet. The trees continue their struggle for survival without a thought of him and, through his poem, he himself, and not the Arctic, becomes that emptiness attributed to the North by southern images; he becomes a high priest of "nullity."

His failed attempts to comprehend the Arctic--what he calls his "stupidities"--are anticipated in "The North West Passage" and generate uneasiness in "At the Movies." While waiting for his plane to leave for Baffin Island, Purdy contemplates the difficulty of finding "anything more to say" about the North. The Northwest Passage has been a metaphor for all that we want to know about the Arctic, but it is, after all, "found / [and] needs no more searching" ("North West Passage" 1-2). He fantasizes about the attempts of the explorers to find the Northwest Passage:

> I amuse myself with the idea of
>   Martin Frobisher
> "Admiral of the Ocean-Sea" who was
> "hurte. . .in the Buttocke with an Arrowe"
> running down the beach near here
> to escape the blood-mad Skraelings hoping
> to reach Mrs. Frobisher in time for tea. (9-14)

The hyperbole of this image ridicules historical explorations, but it also prepares us for his sardonic comments about his own attempts to "find," or comprehend, the North:

> I'll think of something
>
> maybe
>
> a break-thro
>
> to strawberries and ice cream for dinner. (68-71)

In 1576, as Purdy reminds us, Frobisher did not make it home for tea. In view of the poem's last lines, the implication, metaphorically, is that, in 1965, neither might Purdy. Like Frobisher and other explorers who imposed their own preconceptions on the North and, as a result, failed to find in it the resources that might have enabled them to survive there rather than perish, Purdy takes with him into the Arctic his own preconceptions of aesthetics and of the Arctic. Purdy has made himself familiar with Western literary traditions, as he has with the explorers' journals; his perceptions of the sailor-explorers who died in the Arctic are shaped by careful allusions to Fury, Ariadne's thread, and the Minotaur (19, 24, 28), for example. Looking at the North through these lenses, Purdy fears, he may loose his aesthetic bearings by seeing only what he thought is there and not the way the country really is.

In "North West Passage," he hides his fear under his self-mockery, but he cannot hide it in "At the Movies." Inuit and whites watch "a technicolour western shootemup" (5) film that, with its setting, clichéd struggle between good and evil, and tidy ending, could not be much further removed from the realities of clashing cultures in a harsh but beautiful landscape. Inside the hut that serves as a theatre, the atmosphere is "hot and stuffy as hell" (22) and the Inuit enjoy the action but do not understand the dialogue. Ironically, the world outside the theatre, the stage on which the poem's story "happens"

(37), is cold and beautiful. Further, unlike unintelligible dialogue, the landscape is as clear and satisfying as meaningful domestic symbols: "the fiord looks like poured blue milk [and] / mountains like bookmarks under a cold sky" (34-35). The irony of the moment causes Purdy to wonder about his abilities to write anything about the North that is not a "stupidity":

> [. . .] the point I'd hope to separate
> from all these factual things stubbornly
> resists me and I walk home slowly feeling stupid
> rejecting the obvious
> threading my way between stones in the mud
> with the beginnings of a headache. (44-49)

Placed in Purdy's volume between "The North West Passage" and "At the Movies," "Trees at the Arctic Circle" is not so much about elements in the northern landscape as it about a poet whose self-conscious attempts to understand the North generate insight into his own aesthetics.

Louis MacKendrick, in "Al Purdy," a chapter in a volume of Canadian Writers and Their Works (1990), suggests that this poem discloses Purdy's failure "to impose an identity by invidious comparison." In MacKendrick's view, the failure generates a moral discourse that Purdy restates in "The Country of the Young." As he points out, in this poem the figure of Jackson tells the poet that he "can't be looking for something else" (l. 34; MacKendrick 164). However, the question about what to look for is an aesthetic enquiry and not a moral one. It is about the process of perceiving and representing the world and human experience.

"Trees at the Arctic Circle" begins, in the tradition of a prospect poem, as a meditation on the landscape; it becomes, like other modernist poems, an expression of alienation or otherness in the world and of uncertainty about one's own perceptions both of that world and of oneself. The poem's language is that of an ethical discourse; the trees are cowardly but, later, they have a dignity that cannot be denied by a poet's scornful words and foolish judgement. This language, however, masks a self-conscious reflection about the nature of aesthetic interpretation. Rather than abandon or rewrite his initial description of the trees, Purdy leaves it as the first part of a conscious description of his changing perceptions. "I will not alter the poem," he decides, "but let the stupidity remain permanent / as the trees are / in a poem" (54-56). Purdy's recognition that the trees survive on the moisture they draw from the permafrost leads to an epiphany about his own writing. His ideas at the end of the poem grow from his struggle to understand his poetic failure; it is a struggle that parallels that of the trees to draw moisture from the permafrost or "use death" to survive in an arctic environment. Purdy's understanding of the trees changes; so does his understanding of the aesthetic process. George Bowering suggests that the change in Purdy's perspective evokes a "romantic admiration" (94). Allowing, however, for Modernism's continuation of Romanticism's rejection of "classical judgement," as Bowering puts it, the aesthetic this poem constructs is neither a belated form of Romanticism nor a modernist questioning of Romanticism. In "Trees at the Arctic Circle," Purdy looks again at his own poem and sees that his graceless attempt to describe the North is part of a process through which he creates its beauty.

Like those of Smith, Purdy's poems do not present an objective view of what nature seems, or seems not, to say. Instead, "Trees at the Arctic Circle" provides a vision of the process of constructing an aesthetic knowledge of the landscape. However, the relationship between Purdy's trees and his attempts to describe them is ambiguous. Purdy allows his "stupidity," or incomplete understanding of the Arctic, to stand. Iambic lines colour the trees with a dignity that his first perceptions had failed to recognize; the rhythm of the words suggest the existence of features of the North that cannot, otherwise, be contained in the meaning of those words. Purdy's failed aesthetic descriptions will remain as permanent as the bushes struggling to endure in a harsh environment; those trees, however, will remain permanent as his poem about them. These lines seem to echo an older tradition in which poetry grants immortality to transitory moments and to elements of nature, but Purdy's self-chastisement for the stupidity of his poem proposes that a poem's life may be somewhat shorter than eternity. Purdy's arctic trees endure in the northern landscape; what survives for the duration of a poem, and of the moment in which it is written and read, are only the poet's perceptions of those trees. The beauty of the landscape is a truth generated in poetry. It is also a truth that is other than the poet's aesthetic vision and cannot be contained within it; the realities of the world and of human experience remain "unbothered by any human opinion."

Purdy is a little disingenuous when he calls his poem a "stupidity." On Baffin Island, he revisits Ross's aesthetic. As Ross's dreams and images of death had done, Purdy's self-conscious reflections on Baffin Island discern a new kind of aesthetic truth. The knowledge of the North generated by his poems in North of Summer is not that of explorers in "The North West Passage." It is not a Romantic vision of art's ability to descry an enduring meaning in a mutable landscape. Nor is it the impressionist visions of Smith and the Group of Seven, or Scott's vision of a contest between an ancient land and modern development. Purdy's poems collect his observations and reflections about Baffin Island and his experiences of travelling there, and they describe a new process by which to know the world. Purdy is aware of the ancient "pink precambrian granite" ("Listening" 2), respects the confidence of Inuit hunters and their struggles to understand their historical and economic transactions with a southern-directed development, and accepts their laughter at his discomfort; he takes up Ross's paradoxical aesthetic in which beauty is an aesthetic construct that points to a truth that eludes expression.

Canadian modernist poetry has several points of departure and lines of development. One line of development is represented by The Canadian Mercury and its evidence of the struggles of the McGill movement to generate a new kind of poetry in Canada, elements of which are further exemplified in Smith's poems about trees and Scott's poems about the Mackenzie Delta. Roberts's failed quest for a new understanding of a changing world anticipates the paradoxical nature of an aesthetic which seeks a knowledge of reality that is inaccessible to other modes of thought and that cannot be reduced to aesthetic expressions. It is an aesthetic that is embodied in the poems that Ross published in The Dial and in Sonnets, and it is developed further by Purdy. Ross's aesthetic signalled a shift away from the perception of a truth that is inherent in nature or human experience, and Purdy's continues in the path Ross identified.

North of Summer generates a way of knowing the world by aestheticising it while confessing the poet's involvement in the creation of that knowledge. Ross's paradoxical aesthetic did not lead to expressions of a modernist anxiety concerning the loss of universal references but to celebrations of the vulnerable, transitory quality of human experience; it also resulted in a mistrust in the words and forms of poetry. After his Sonnets, Ross did not write very much. Purdy's North of Summer gives rise to a similar aesthetic with different consequences. When he grieves, it is not over the loss of universal truths but over the harmful effects of northern economic and political development. He celebrates the diversity of the North and the surprises it presents to his knowledge. Like Ross, he recognizes the paradoxical quality of aesthetic constructions. Poetry creates an understanding of the world that cannot be apprehended by other modes of thought, but it cannot reduce truth to its own images and words; poets cannot avoid "stupidities." Purdy's paradoxical aesthetic is, in the words of Jackson in "The Country of the Young," a recognition that the limitation of any aesthetic construct is also an invitation to look again at reality, but also it holds out a promise that, if truth remains outside the poem, there also remains something new to comprehend. Purdy's prolific career after North of Summer suggests that he continued to find much to comprehend.

In "Prelude Poem," Inuit "in mukluks climb / the snake fences" of Ameliasburg; images from his northern experiences haunt Purdy on his return home. In "Eskimo Graveyard, " the tents in which people live appear as "glowing swans." The figure of the swan returns in "Lament for the Dorsets" (1968), a poem published after North of Summer, but it is a synecdoche for Purdy's paradoxical aesthetic. Published in Northian in 1968, a revised version of the poem is included in his volumes, Wild Grape Wine

(1968) and in Selected Poems (1972).[31] Our knowledge of the Dorsets is derived from archaeological investigations, but Purdy searches for an alternative way by which we might understand something about them. An aesthetical investigation of artifacts from an archaeological site, his poem finds in those artifacts a point of departure from which to imagine their original context:

> Animal bones and some mossy tent rings
> scrapers and spearhead   carved ivory swans
> all that remains of the Dorset giants
> who drove the Vikings back to their long ships
> talked to spirits of earth and water
> --a picture of terrifying old men
> so large they broke the backs of bears
> so small they lurk behind bone rafters
> in the brain of modern hunters. (1-9)

What Purdy realizes in "Lament for the Dorsets" is similar to the effects achieved by Eliot, H. D., Pound, and Williams as they turned to ancient mythologies or the premodernist poetry of China or the French troubadours. As he does in "The North West Passage" and "Still Life in a Tent," in this poem Purdy searches the past for new perceptions of a changing, modern world. Purdy shares with the archaeologist, the student of the history of climate change, and other investigators of the past, a curiosity about how the Dorset culture became extinct. He speculates, for example, about weather cycles and changes in seal population and wonders if the hunters, who "couldn't figure it out,"

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[31] For this discussion, I rely on the version in The Collected Poems of Al Purdy.

> went around saying to each other
> plaintively,
> "What's wrong? What happened?
> Where are the seals gone?"
> And died. (24-29)

"Lament for the Dorsets," however, is not a scientific analysis presented in verse as ome writers had done in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Like others, Purdy thinks about scant historical information and speculative anthropological data ("puzzled Dorsets [. . .] with hairy thumbs around 1350 A. D." [22-23]), but he offers, through the aesthetic lens of a poem, an understanding of those objects that cannot be articulated by archaeology, history, or anthropology. He imagines the unimaginable, the fear experienced by the last Dorsets as they faced their own extinction, and, in so doing, he asks about the place of art in a world shaped by the twentieth-century fear of nuclear annihilation.

As he had done with the ground willows in "Trees at the Arctic Circle," Purdy sets aside his first attempts to describe the artifacts and begins again; he disturbs his own historical and sentimental vision with a question about the possibility of certain knowledge of the past. If the Dorsets "never imagined us in their future," he asks, "how could we imagine them in the past / squatting among the moving glaciers / six hundred years ago?" (34-36). The question is rhetorical, its answer almost beyond comprehension.

If “apartment dwellers [,] / executives of neon death [, and] / Warmakers with things that explode” (31-33) imagine a past culture, they can do so only by blurring it with an even older history; the Dorsets of 1350 are petrified among the remains of trilobites and dinosaurs (39-44). Purdy wants to find another understanding of the past made present in the artifacts he sees.

He sets aside the question about climatic or other causes of the end of the Dorsets and focuses on a single figure. He sets aside, too, his musings about the puzzlement of the ancient seal hunters and invites us to imagine with him (“Let’s say”) an aesthetic response:

> Some old hunter with one lame leg
> a bear had chewed
> sitting in a caribou skin tent
> --the last Dorset?
> Let’s say his name was Kudluk
> carving 2-inch ivory swans. (ll.45-52)

The sculptor is an elderly and lame hunter caught in the last moments of his life and those of his people. Like the A. Y. Jackson of Purdy’s letters to Laurence, he appears to be a spent force. What he carves, however, seems, like Arctic ground willows, to endure. Intended as a gift for the sculptor’s dead granddaughter, it is laid aside, unfinished. Uncovered later by wind and archaeologists, it is completed in the words of another artist, one from a culture that cannot imagine the Dorset hunter with any more certainty than that hunter could have imagined us.

Purdy's poem aestheticises history. It creates an intersection of times and cultures where a swan carved from ivory becomes more than an elegy for an extinct culture. A small aesthetic object, and not simply an archaeological artifact, the swan becomes a tenuous link between the Dorsets, their anxieties, and their understanding of beauty, on the one hand, and the poet, the anxieties of his time, and his aesthetics, on the other. Scientific discourse discerns certain kinds of truth, but they cannot understand Purdy's question about how we may imagine the meaning of those truths. An unfinished sculpture, instead, generates the possibility of an answer, one which is given shape in the form of another crafted object, the poem itself. "Trees at the Arctic Circle" recognizes the limited abilities of aesthetic attempts to understand the reality of the world, but, in so doing, it keeps the willows alive by giving their struggle to endure a place in a poem, which continues to be read. In "Lament for the Dorsets," a fragment from an archaeological record is restored to its own context. "After 600 years," writes Purdy, "the ivory thought / is still warm" (72-4). Held warmly in a poem, the swan becomes a figure for the vitality of imagination, for the process by which a modernist aesthetic, turning perceptions of the past into perceptions of the present, creates a new understanding of human experience.

Purdy's paradoxical modernist aesthetic represents reality as something more than we can know and put into words of any kind, but which can also be perceived and expressed without becoming lost in the reductions of relativism. The arctic landscape and the people who lived, and continue to live, there, whether the Dorsets of 1350 or the Inuit of Baffin Island in 1965, cannot be contained within knowledge created by scientific discourse or the clichéd images produced by an invading, southern culture. Purdy's self-parody, his expressions of frustration as he struggles to apprehend the "full shape of the Arctic," and his refusal to be certain about the truth of his vision of the past ("Let's say"), enable his poems to imagine what is otherwise imperceptible. If Purdy's aesthetics does not anticipate Postmodernism's relativism, neither does it point to the presence of a Romantic sublime in the landscape, to the vapid ideals of a tired strain of Romanticism, or to the lament of early Modernists for the loss of the centre, or a reference point by which to discern beauty. Like Ross's poems, Purdy's locate beauty in the mutability of the world, and in the vulnerability and transitory quality of human experience.

The swan is not the only piece of incomplete Arctic sculpture that Purdy contemplates. In "The Sculptors" (1966), in North of Summer, Purdy thinks about contemporary Inuit carvings. His point of departure is not an archaeological remnant but commercial rejections, cases of sculptures that have been returned to Pangnirtung from Frobisher because they were not "good enough for sale to / T. Eaton Co. Ltd." (5-6). It is not from reports by the Department of Northern and Indian Affairs, mining development plans, or sociological studies that Purdy acquires his knowledge about misshapen lives and the hard struggles of the Inuit to endure in a North invaded by the South, but from reflection on aesthetic objects. The imperfections of the returned carvings lead him to reflect on human fragility and imperfection:

> [. . .] they're all flawed
> broken
>   bent

misshapen

failed animals

with vital parts missing

And I have a sudden vision

of the carvers themselves

in this broken sculpture

as if the time & the place & me

had clicked into brief alignment

and a switch pulled

so that I can see and feel

what it was like to be them

the tb out-patients

failed hunters

who make a noise at the wrong time

or think of something else

at the trigger moment

and shine their eyes

into a continual tomorrow

the losers and failures

who never do anything right

and never will

the unlucky ones

always on the verge
of a tremendous discovery
who finally fail to deceive
even themselves [. . .]. (42-66)

In the tradition of Baudelaire's poems, Les fleurs du mal (1857) and Yeats's "rag-and-bone shop of the heart" ("The Circus Animals' Desertion" [1939] [III.8]), Purdy identifies beauty in the presence of imperfection.

Beauty, writes Purdy in "Depression in Namu, B. C." (1973-74), "bores me" when it is "without the slight ache / of ugliness that makes me want to change things," a desire he confesses to "knowing it's impossible" (10-12). It is, he admits in his preface to The Collected Poems of Al Purdy, not only the "shimmery lace and white brocade" of icebergs that become his "standard for the word beauty" [Purdy's emphasis], but also the thought "that a malignant relative of theirs once sank the Titanic" (xvi). As he discovered in his recognition that arctic ground willow fail to measure up to southern, ideal images of trees, the aesthetic imperfections of the rejected carvings in "The Sculptors" create his vision of the sculptors themselves, "who carve in their own image / of maimed animals" (66-67). This definition of beauty he values: "I'd like to buy every damn case" (68). It is a definition of beauty that undermines the imposition of preconceived ideas on the North such as Frobisher's desire to map the Northwest Passage, Jackson's recycling, in 1965, of that aesthetic vision of the Canadian landscape created by the first generation of Canadian modernist painters, Purdy's own attempt to find modest dignity while relieving himself among the stones of Baffin Island's terrain, and his initial determination to describe the arctic vegetation with reference to preconceived ideas about "real" trees. Beauty is not an a priori concept, the expression of something in "the way you thought it was," but a process of perceiving the nature of reality and the ways in which we understand it. Like Ross's, Purdy's aesthetic is paradoxical; beauty eludes poetry even as it is generated by a poet's words, lines, and images.

CONCLUSION

PRESSED FLOWERS IN THE LANDSCAPE OF CANADIAN MODERNIST POETRY

Canadian modernist poetry in English has several points of departure and lines of development. Among them is that represented by the poems published in The Canadian Mercury in 1928 and 1928; another emerges in Roberts's poems in New York Nocturnes, Ross's verses, and Purdy's poems in North of Summer. The poems in The Canadian Mercury exemplify the struggles of the McGill movement. Its poets fashion for Canadian literature a poetry that pushes away from belated engagements with the creative revolutions of Romanticism. The poetry against which the McGill strain of Modernism emerged is exemplified in some of the poems by Carman and Roberts, and in much of the poetry in The Canadian Mercury. To develop a new aesthetic, the McGill poets sought to season their perspectives on Canadian landscape and on Canadian experiences of a changing, and increasingly industrialized and urbanized world that had survived the nightmare of the First World War, with elements from a protean, international, literary Modernism. Their efforts produced several short-lived journals and climaxed with the publication, in 1936, of a motley collection of poetry, New Provinces.

Few copies of this anthology were sold; its impact on Canadian poetry may well be viewed as a symbolic rather than genuine influence. Many of its poems reflect the same tendencies and attempts that the poems of Smith, Kennedy, and Scott exemplified, a few years earlier, in The Canadian Mercury. Early expressions of Modernism in Canadian poetry did not clear-cut a literary landscape marked with Romantic deadwood. Rather, they cleared a space by selectively cutting down certain elements of the prevailing aesthetic. The poems of Smith and Scott, and essays by Smith and Kennedy, for example, struggle to displace the prosody, landscape descriptions, vague expressions of emotions, and outworn ideals of late Canadian Romanticism. In the space thus cleared, innovative experiments were grafted onto conventional practices. Trehearne argues that Canadian modernist poetry arises from an interplay between Anglo-American Modernism and the fin de siècle poetics of Aestheticism and Decadence, and that we need to rethink our understanding "of the ways in which Canadian literature has tended to adopt international artistic models" (6). Glickman suggests that a continuing preoccupation with the sublime shaped the development of Canadian poetry in the early part of the twentieth century, "despite critical insistence on impersonality and objectivity"(127).

Discussions by Trehearne and Glickman, among others, make it clear that the development of Canadian modernist poetry cannot be represented by a simple genealogy or a single line of progress. Norris's point, in his history of little magazines in Canada, that the development of a new aesthetic was not possible until the establishment of magazines and journals brought together poets who were otherwise isolated, is a helpful contribution to our understanding of the beginnings of Canadian Modernism. It remains, however, that a number of poets were at work, each developing, with varying degrees of success, their own poetic hybrids. The results, such as poems by Livesay, Knister, Ross and Smith, for example, appeared in literary magazines published outside, but also read inside, Canada. The rise and fall of Canadian periodicals from Smith and Scott's McGill Fortnightly Review to Sutherland's First Statement (1942-45) and Souster's Contact (1952-54), not only gave Canadian poets Canadian outlets for their work and exposure to Imagism, Symbolism, the poetry of Yeats and Eliot, and that of Pound and the Black Mountain poets; they also reflect a continuous diversity of modernist strains.

The poetry of P. K. Page (b. 1916) in the 1940s, for example, reflects the continuing appeal of Imagism and her engagement with the social commentary of W. H. Auden (1907-73), while that of her contemporary, Margaret Avison (b. 1918), exemplifies a continuing interest in metaphysical poetry and the influence of the Black Mountain poets. The colloquial speech and interest in the daily struggles of ordinary people in the poetry of Alden Nowlan (1933-83) sets him in the company of Bukowski and Purdy, while the self-conscious Dionysian Modernism of Irving Layton (b. 1912) reflects a renewed interest in Romanticism. In these strains of Canadian Modernism, as with Modernism generally, the aesthetic is a distinct way of perceiving the world and our experiences of it. These strains also reflect an on-going desire to renew the aesthetic practices through which we may locate beauty in a constantly changing world.

Nowlan's modernist poems, like those of Ross, create small scenes of nature; like those of Purdy, they describe local landscapes and individuals in contemporary, colloquial speech, and realistic details. Nowlan's poetry documents the limitations of human experience rather than generates perspectives on that experience. Avison's taut images and metaphysical conceits, her Smith-like fusion of emotion and idea, and her creation of the possibilities that what she envisions can sustain multiple meanings, generates, as do the poems of Ross and Purdy, an awareness that the world is mutable and experience transitory. Her poems do not, however, find aesthetic truth in those qualities but beyond the realities we encounter. The poems of Nowlan and Avison reflect, like those of other Modernists, a creative engagement with various ideas, styles, and approaches. They search for a pervasive grace that inheres in nature, or attempt to document the mundane tragedies of human experience.

Ross's poems, and those of Purdy in North of Summer, turn away from the quest for inherent truth and generate, instead, new ways of knowing the world by aestheticising it while confessing the poet's involvement in the creation of that knowledge. Ross's paradoxical aesthetic does not lead to expressions of a modernist anxiety concerning the loss of universal references, but to celebrations of the vulnerable, transitory quality of human experience; it also results in a mistrust in the words and forms of poetry. After his Sonnets, Ross does not write very much. Purdy's North of Summer gives rise to a similar aesthetic with different consequences. He does not lament the loss of universal truths but the harmful effects of northern economic and political development. He celebrates the diversity of the North and the surprises it presents to his prior understanding. Like Ross, he recognizes the paradoxical quality of aesthetic constructions; poetry creates an understanding of the world that cannot be perceived by other modes of thought, but it cannot reduce that understanding to its own images and words. Poets cannot avoid "stupidities."

In "Arctic Rhododendrons," the speaker adds a few fragile flowers to his letter.

They have caused him to imagine earlier lovers:

> Years ago
> it may have been
> that lovers came this way
> stopped in the outdoor hotel
> to watch the water floorshow
> and lying prone together
> where the purged green
> boils to a white heart
> and the shore trembles
> like a stone song
> with bodies touching
> flowers were their conversation
> and love the sound of a colour
> that last two weeks in August
> and then dies
> except for the three or four
> I pressed in this letter
> and send whispering to you. (9-26)

The pressed flowers invoke a perspective on love than cannot be contained within the speaker's words; they reflect an awareness of the mutability of love, which nevertheless, preserves it. There are, however, no flowers here, but only the poets' words. The paradox of this modernist strain of poetry, anticipated in Roberts's city garden and developed in Ross's poems, lies not only in a recognition of Modernism's suspicion of art's value and an anxiety concerning its abilities to perceive truth. It is also a recognition of the value of art for its own sake, just as the value of the pressed flowers lies in what the flowers signify themselves and not in the words of the speaker. More specifically, modernist poetry does not contain truth but generates it; paradoxical Modernism also apprehends that the knowledge a poem creates cannot be reduced to its lines, prosody, or images. It is only in Purdy's words that we catch a glimpse of the flowers that embody a knowledge irreducible to those words, as it is only in Ross's words that we catch a glimpse of beauty in a sawmill. Ross's is a vision of aesthetic truth that emerges at the intersection of wilderness and industry, in elements in motion, and in the tension between the mutability and elusive nature of reality and the desires and visions of an aesthetic aware of both its limitations and its generative powers.

APPENDIX:
THE POEMS OF W. W. E. ROSS IN THE DIAL

TWO POEMS[32]

I
Soldiery (289)

Marching   the men
soldiers going along with drums
over the earth, over the earth

to kill   yet
is the air
sweet and clear
the sun rides and the wind glides

                they
with keen blades   go
marching   marching
over   the earth

while the sun rides
and the wind glides

---

[32] "Two Poems" was published in volume 84 of The Dial (April 1928). "I: Soldiery" appears on page 289, and "II" [In the ravine] on pages 289-290.

II

[In the ravine]

In the ravine   I stood
and watched the snowflakes
falling   into the stream
               into the stream
glowing gracefully between
banks of snow
                 The black water
of the winter creek   came
around a bed   above
and disappeared
around a bed   below

Filled with melted snow
to the brim
the creek   came
around a bend--
and disappeared below
around a bend--
ground covered with snow

Thus I stood   the snow
descended   by degrees
into the stream
                   into the stream

SEVEN POEMS[33]

[An iron railway bridge]

An iron railway bridge. The view
Extends along the level track,
The ties, stone-ballasted, the two
Lines of steel rail polished, black,

To where around a distant curve
Will soon appear, surprise indeed!
The locomotive's clanging swerve
With careless, tireless speed.

Let me hear the coming train,
See the swift splendour of its gait,
Feel as the first inventor when
He watched his work, erect, elated,

With a divine encouragement,
A feeling of triumphant mind--
The locomotive as it went,
The sluggard smoke, trailing behind;

---

[33] "Seven Poems" was published in volume 85 of The Dial (August 1928). [An iron railway bridge] appears on pages 108-109, [Fairy kings] and [Music] appear on page 107, [Flowers] on page 110, "Impression of New York" on page 109, [Lions] on pages 109-110, and "Sonnet" on page 108.

Or let me seated in a car
Watch the straight poles flicker past,
The dull fields extending far,
The clouds coming not so fast

As the engine, gliding down
The changing grade, or wheeling past,
With sustained whistle, each small town
Into the terminus at last.

[Fairy kings]

Fairy kings
and fairy queens
are no longer
seen on greens.
They are gone,
it would appear,
to some country
far from here;

To some land
where firmly stand
in full leaf
trees of belief
in fairy things.
There fairy kings
and fairy queens

are seen on greens.

[Flowers]

Flowers
revolving in the sun
spinning colours
whirling
colours yellow
red and blue
and yellow

Flowers spinning in the sun
make the garden make one
garden in the sun.

These
upon stalks rotating
red brick-coloured
blood-coloured blue
yellow and pink

Flowers rotating in the sun
make the garden make one
garden in the sun.

Impression of New York

Tall streets
flamboyance   of size
                         and noise
of a million rivets

. .

Steady roar
of traffic past the door
streaming along the avenue
in full view

. .

                         Darkness waits
but not here
Night is day   here.

. .

On Broadway   night is day

. .

                         Air
of the ocean   where
ships come and go

. .

Below
the taxis go
rushing in swarms like young fish

. .

                         Where
is rest or quiet?   Not there.

[Lions]

Lions elastic
leaping
great cats great cats
Lions
playfully in sport they play
elastically

Who fears a lion today?
Bullets bullets
shall drive the lions away.

Lions
great cats sport and play
They are yellow tawny
they are yellow in the desert
they run faster than a bird
flying
they run slower than a bullet.

Lions
leaping on the plain
shall not chase man again
great cats lions.

[Music]

Music for our ears
our ears

Seldom is it that one hears
Fit music for our ears.
Music
changes from day to day;
it will take our souls away;
music runs on from day to day,
music makes the mourner mourn.
Music
played mournfully today
tomorrow shall make gay.

Music changes day by day;
music shall take our souls away.

Sonnet

This water runs so smoothly and the green
Reflected in it so distinctly shows,
It must appear to one at hand he knows
That he, below, another world has seen,
There in the water's heart, where in between
The upper and the low the surface flows
Without a flaw. Above, the summer glows

As we together watch the stream serene.
The day is delightful on this river shore
And in the sunlight everything is near.
The river in silence at our feet has made
Its course, it seems, for ever and an hour;
While Death, in the distance, meaningly may nod
And whisper to us. But we shall not hear.

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